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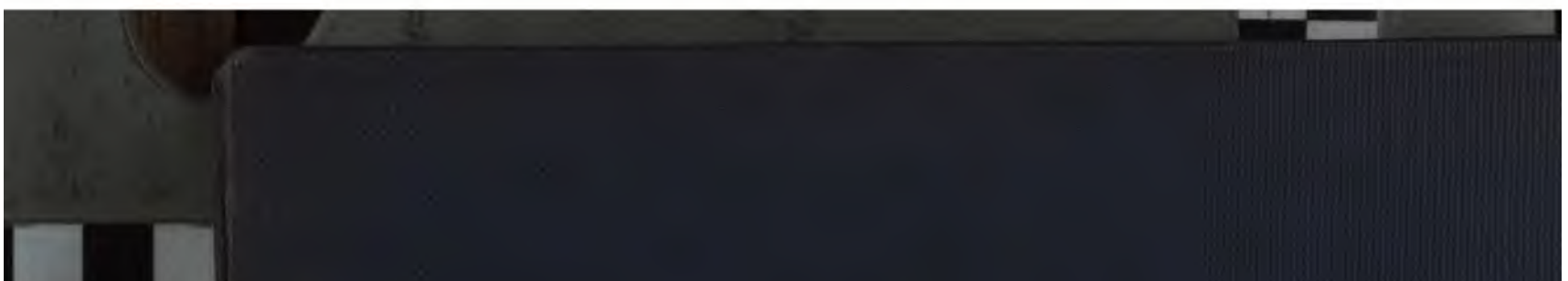

THE CANYON OF THE FOOLS

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SHE MEANT TO BE IN AT THE DEATH. WHAT A MOMENT! WHAT A WOMAN!

THE CANYON OF THE FOOLS

By

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ILLUSTRATIONS

SHE MEANT TO BE IN AT THE DEATH. WHAT A MOMENT! WHAT A WOMAN! . . . . . *Frontispiece*

"WHICH MINE ARE YOU RUSTLING?" MR. CLINT WANTED TO KNOW . . . . . *Facing p.* 104

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"TAKE MY ADVICE, YOUNG MAN, AND HIT THE GILA-MONSTER TRAIL. THE FOOLS ARE NOT ALL DEAD YET THAT LIVE IN THIS CANYON" . . . . . " 232

THE CANYON OF THE FOOLS

CHAPTER I

ROAD fever. It's a strange lust in the heart, isn't it? You and I know, in looking back, what a fatality it may be to a young man. He gets a deep infection, perhaps when he is in the midst of fair designs, dreaming of love and early fortune. It comes whispering and fretting in the blood channels; it has the charm of a myth; it carries the burning delusions of a fever. All at once he feels the tyranny of home life falling like a ton weight on his heart, and he's off—off at a wild tangent, like a drop of water slatted from a turning grindstone. And his pretext may be anything or nothing, too. I say to myself that I would never have started for Los Angeles if Joe Carney hadn't gone there from the legislature to practice medicine, but how can I tell? I might have wound up in Kamchatka or the Persian Gulf instead of the Canyon of the Fools.

I first met Joe Carney when I was a page in the legislature, with nothing to do but shoot marbles on the marble pavements and yell: "Skinny bone! Elbow grease! Three fingers in the mud!" Joe was one of my ten senators, a doctor by profession,

and an adventurer by blood. He had been a sailor, and a soldier in the Spanish War, and in general he was the man for my money. I was fresh from Dowagiac, where they make wooden minnows; and here was Joe, who had been starved and burnt and shot up and kicked about wherever wind blows and sand flies.

He was a foot-loose man—right. He had beaten his way around the world without a red cent in his pocket. He had seen ships and cities and deserts enough to fit out a physical geography. He had frozen in the far south, dangled off yard-arms, hammered ice as thick as a blessed stove-pipe off a ship's backstays deep down there in the Antarctic. He had singed his whiskers and seared his flesh and laid bare his knuckle bones feeding ship's fires; he had trekked and swagged and tramped, eaten sour dough and bannock and damper and poor-man's bread, and been flooded out of mines and river valleys and ship's holds. Drowned out or smoked out, it's all one. The fact remains that he had taken his bellyful of hard-ships and he made a wonderful conversationalist.

But you probably know the fascinating loquacity of reminiscence. It shows you the precious drop of romance distilled from all the bitter waters of agony and hard gray fact. Experience is good, but then sometimes it doesn't dress down well, to use the language of the slaughterhouses.

But how could I know that? I ask you. I wanted to hunt up all those old haunts of Joe Carney's. I wanted to come face to face before I

died with that barmaid he had loved and lost in the *Rose of Australia.* I wanted to feel the jolt and jar of the salt sea coming up against the sides of some hell-bent old hooker. I used to dream of clinging to the wheel of that belabored sea wagon, a grim figure, running water in buckets, and staring ahead at the shiver of the black yards; murk overhead, all the earmarks of a dirty night, too; that banshee scream in the rigging, a knocking together of iron parts, a bellow aloft of wild sail, perchance the death rattle of the plunging ship.

Can you merge with me in that stuff? Gad! I had the right temperament for adventure in those daydreams! I was a fearsome character, grim and yet lovable, too; and do you know, no matter how wild the night or how hard the outlook, I always saved myself. I took care of that. At the latest possible second—the eleventh hour, so to speak—things somehow took a favorable turn, and I was saved from myself and from the consequences of my noble disregard of life.

Well, you know an exquisite harmony never quite expires, does it? I imagine it is taken up in the hearts of those who hear it somehow, and transmuted into something golden and heart-touching. Yes, sir, I would come to and find beautiful women bending over me; women whom I had served in some heart-choking manner and who were grateful, by George! and not afraid to show me they were grateful!

The upshot of it was, no man who had known Joe could go on living in Dowagiac. I had gone back there after being surreptitiously dropped

from a theological college in Kalamazoo, and started in making wooden minnows; but the fish I was trying to lure required less artificial bait.

So on a fine, still August morning I slipped away from home, leaving a note to the effect that I was going to Los Angeles to study anatomy. I had some doubts about myself, of course, while drifting over to Bay City. Something like dismay would catch hold of me by the knees and unhinge me there a little. I had proposed to ferry myself around by the simple process of nailing fast freights, and I had no more idea than a bivalve how to go about nailing fast freights. I had obscure dreams of leaping in the dark and falling under the wheels—but I always saved myself.

These doubts were the product of night, strangeness, lack of lodgings, and the like of that. The mornings were better. Those sleepy yellow mornings in sleepy maple-shaded towns still linger with me. I remember sauntering through the red streets, yawning at the vine-covered brick houses with their big, old-fashioned eaves, and the well-watered lawns, where baby carriages had been left out overnight—yes, and croquet balls, too, gleaming in the dew. Everything still, secure, stable. Everything spoke of citizenship, law and order, the appointed task. Isn't there something dread, something compulsory and grim, in that notion of the appointed task?

It's true, the world couldn't go on if we all took to our heels. Yet I suppose custom or timidity quells some fundamental nomadic impulse in most of us. Those who can afford to travel do so, you

observe, by a kind of instinct. Millionaires and hobos, for choice. They are afraid of reaching the perishing point in the monotony of days.

I went in the guise of a sociologist, by the way. You can see where I have written on the flyleaf of my notebook: "Diary kept while on an expedition to explain to myself certain sociological questions. My associations with the lowest classes are self-directed. I call attention to the fact that this is a temporary mode of living. I intend to matriculate in Los Angeles for the study of medicine."

You see? In my innocence I thought that I could placate the shacks and the bulls by pushing that neat paragraph under their eyes. I was carrying the key to my character, as much so as if I had hung it around my neck before taking the plunge—the explanation of the anomaly; a nice young man fresh from a theological college, and turned tramp. I hadn't quite shaken the odor of sanctity, it appears. Yet there was not lacking, in Dowagiac, the usual run of people who said I had used religion as a cloak.

I got into Chi about ten o'clock one hot morning, and my first official act was to pick up a girl's hand bag, wrought out of crocodile skin, I fancy, with a brass monogram clinging to it—M. G.

Here's the inventory—I copied it in my diary: One dazzling sample of plaid cloth, pencil with the point broken off, handkerchief that one tear would have wet through and through, one soiled white kid glove, bar pin full of Paris diamonds, a letter with the lady's name and address scrawled in a

massive fist, and way down in the lemon-colored lining two or three cards reading, "May Gowdy, Omaha, Nebraska."

Can you imagine it? Imagine a vision-mad man picking up a collection like that in the heart of a great city? By George! you have seen women open these bags and ponder over them, haven't you, and snap them to with that calm look that excludes you? Do you suppose this bag was representative? I forgot to mention a little round mirror and a pad of thin papers dusted with rice powder. I seemed to know without inquiry that these were for taking off the shine, real or imaginary, from a nose that—well, what sort of nose exactly would it be?

Speculation as to this nose intrigued me on to read the letter that May Gowdy had unfortunately lost with her other possessions. It was from a man, Jim Harper, who had gone West to hunt for gold, and from where I sat it seemed to me that he was hanging on more dog than his prospects seemed to warrant. His employer, Swasey, was going to send him into a place called the Canyon of the Fools—from what I could read between the lines, there seemed to be nothing but stern logic in that—and there, if adverse interests didn't bump him prematurely off, he meant to pitch in and locate ore. She could look for a necklace of nuggets about Christmas. There were one or two misty allusions that the two individuals in the know would likely chuckle over; and then Jim Harper loosened his belt and gripped his pen low down and in one fierce little paragraph he told her outright how he loved her, and complained about a ride she had

mentioned taking by moonlight with some man whose name he couldn't get because her writing was so careless—on a level with her conduct, in Jim's view.

Gad! he was lush, and at the same time tyrannical! He reminded her that he had come out there to that God-forsaken region to heap up gold for little May, and that the least she could do was to sit tight and control her lonesomeness while he was away. And, do you know, just from getting that crude insight into how things stood between them, I was all for May, and I felt a foolish itch to intervene somehow and push that love-infested idiot Jim Harper off the premises.

The address was on the envelope, of course; and it was there, in that villainous employment agency, with its smirched blackboards, its dusty windows, hacked benches, and vile air sluggish with stale tobacco smoke that I first saw May Gowdy. A little railed-in inclosure, with a slimsy gate that bent either way, and May sitting there seriously with a lot of slips, like bills of lading, in her lap. She looked at me questioningly, told me crisply to come through the gate if I felt able.

I like to lean back now and remember that moment. It has the sweet suddenness and the nip that first love always has. May Gowdy was a knock-out, a haymaker. I saw that at a glance, and it unhinged me. The fairest skin in the world, the proudest carriage—and you know how few girls nowadays learn to carry themselves well—a kind of surprise bluntness at the very tip of her nose that would have brought a sculptor to his

knees; and those blue eyes, set a trifle wide, perhaps, that you couldn't have fathomed with a deep-sea lead.

Her hair was black—coal black, blue-black, man—and she had it done up with that ravishing fall over the temples that women who have masses of it can afford to indulge. Have I mentioned her lashes? They were Oriental, I opine, and she got results with them all through her waking hours.

"Just something I picked up," I said, jocosely, in a parched voice, and it sounded to my disgusted ear as if every bit of jovial humanity had been squeezed out of it, reducing it to a squeak, to the symbol of calf love.

"How nice of you!" May said.

She took the bag, hefted it, laid it on her desk. She looked at me under level brows. Put yourself in the place of a young man palpitating in the adolescent vague, coming to the big town for the first time and falling in with such as May. I tell you it was immense! It had the miracle flavor of Arabian Nights. It's natural for you to want to know what we talked about, or why it was I didn't go away, and I can't satisfy you on either head—not altogether. I know she asked me if I was living in town, if I had been long in town—something of that nature—and I said, huskily, "No." She opened the bag and looked in there thoughtfully, and I told her desperately that I had come from the back country and that I was going West to seek my fortune. It looked woodsy, I know, from where she sat. Well, I was woodsy, and my next words proved it.

She said, "If you're really in for that, why not go out and join Jim?"

"He's got trouble enough all his own," I slipped out, and right away I burned from head to heel like a man wrapped in a kerosene-soaked blanket.

May didn't seem conscious of the fact that she had sprung that trap, though. She assumed as naturally as a child that I had read that letter; and still, account for it how you will, I was unwilling to crawl forward with the admission. I couldn't even bring myself to say a good word for Jim Harper, for that matter. He simply went against my grain, and I contented myself with closing my eyes and muttering, "The chances, of course, are against anybody's finding gold."

"Well, faint heart, you know," May dropped out. "You can smile, but I really expect him to do something big or something awful, I don't know which, and I wrote him that. He's certainly one peach of a kid, but still he's so unstable, don't you know. You never can put your finger on him—as to his plans, that is. He writes a good letter, though. Don't you think so?"

I grew cherry red and grunted.

"Which way are you heading, if I may make so bold?" she said then.

I told her. I sketched in for her briefly what was eating me—fears, ambitions, everything; even to this business of nailing fast freights which was looming up blacker and blacker the nearer I got to the freight yards. And she narrowed those quizzical eyes and said: "It 'll never do, dear

boy. Your best move is back to that town where they make wooden minnows."

She staggered me, I tell you. She had the ability to pin a man to the mat by the sheer flying weight of her cynicism. It was cold and sparkling like a January morning. By George! I felt like her little boy, and I sat there stunned, in a fit of crass resignation, with my elbow on one corner of that little oak desk and my fingers dabbling in the wire-clipped sheets heaped up in that wire basket. She breathed business, competence, executive capacity. She was scented like the springtime, and that smooth, blue-veined wrist and hand came out of a black sleeve with a dainty linen cuff and moved around in the neighborhood of her face, admonishing tresses, with an effect of pure legerdemain. She stole over me, she unsettled me, and filled me full of crazy, half-formed resolutions to pull off something big that would have that proud girl sinking to her knees by my side with little yearning cries—when it was all but too late.

She got me back on solid ground by saying in an indescribable voice, "What does your mother say to all this?"

I lisped, "I don't know—didn't talk it over," and she nodded. Thought so.

"That's how it was with me," she said, presently, veiling her eyes with her lashes. "They've never got over it—couldn't understand. Goodness knows it might have been better for me if I had listened a little more to their side of it. But I suppose we have to learn for ourselves. How do

you propose to get out there, by the way—to Los, where you are going to study medicine?"

"Beat my way," I rumbled. "Freights."

"Freights? That's easy said. Do you know how to beat your way on freights? I don't believe you have the first idea."

Well, what ideas would naturally occur to a young man at the mercy of a girl like May for the first time? I told her flat that that suspicion of hers was nothing short of clairvoyant. I didn't know. Had thought of dozens of ways—creeping in on the rods, the brake beams, secreting myself in the ice boxes of refrigerator cars, having myself consigned in a closed crate with holes to let in air. And she laughed, glanced at me and away, down at those papers on her desk, which she stirred with a pink forefinger. That glance of hers was like a strong sunbeam, and I felt like a blessed little mote dancing around in it. I reflected how far we had got away from our caves and the saber-toothed tiger, when a delicate mechanism like May was properly equipped to maintain herself in the modern struggle and a hulking brute like myself was next door to on the bones.

"I know one thing," she said, "you'll be under the wheels in no time if you start in nailing freights. If you really mean to go through with it, why not ship out, just at first?"

"Ship out?"

"Surely! Ride the cushions. Till you get better acquainted with the road, I mean. Don't you think you'd better?"

"How is that done?"

She told me. She could ship me out herself, and would—here, from this very spot. I asked meekly how it was a man went to work to ship out. It was simplicity itself. A man, it seemed, agreed to work at something, somewhere—harvesting, for example—and an agency shipped him to that place on the meager strength of his promise. It might be on a harvest special, on a milk train, a work train.

"But look here! Once there, shouldn't I have to knuckle down and work?" I objected in a whisper.

She gave me another of those glorious, clarifying looks out of her quizzical eyes and bent toward me.

"Would you? I thought this was a free country."

I tell you that girl amazed me and set me to thinking for myself. Of course it was a free country. How could I ever have doubted that plain fact? I began to feel all my shackles dropping off in conversation with that girl. She appeared to have a resolution formed for every contingency.

"She must be years older than I am," I remember thinking, and still she didn't look it. With her lips pouted slightly, and her head nodding toward me, she seemed softened, stripped of her case-hardening, and I thought, mazily: "She might take it into her head to kiss me. What is that Bohunk lurking around for in the doorway?"

There you have it in a nutshell. That's the

spirit at the bottom of all adventure, that hint of wistfulness and hope, that attitude of eternally deluded expectancy. It's like living in a thronging multitude of shapes, submissive to fancy. She did strike fire in me, and at the same time there was something maddening about her, something conveyed in her tone, launched out of her eye, something patronizing, that seemed to say she was only wasting her words, because I would never follow up these leads. Too callow, too woefully callow. I don't know how I ever got away from there, or what the impulse must have been that gouged me out of that chair finally. I had papers in my hand, made out by May, that shipped me to Five Forks, and I found myself asking her if she wouldn't like to be the recipient of a post card from me with the Los Angeles postmark on it.

"I sure would," she said. She was wonderful. "And say," she added, "in case you do get as far as Omaha and find yourself on the rocks, Mr. McCarty, you'd better take the address of my people there. They're as good—as good as gold."

She gave it to me. It's in the diary to this day, along with that drawing of a perpetual-motion machine a man tried to interest me in. I slipped it into my breast pocket and brushed past May and put my hand on the little gate. She touched me on the arm hearteningly, and that little fillip was more affecting than a sheer embrace. Gad! she was expert! I felt like a straw on the current, moved away from her against my will, by mighty intangible forces, solar energies, the mockeries

and the ironies that straddle the way of the inclinations.

I managed to say, hoarsely, "See you again sometime," and in spite of myself I was out of the agency, out there in a world of bricks, filth, wagons, bawling voices.

She didn't believe I was even going to get to Omaha!

CHAPTER II

AND, by George! it was a long road to Omaha! I had doubts myself at times. I hadn't any money, you know—anything more than a little silver, that is. In those days I regarded money as something that flowed in unawares—like a blush to the cheek, like health into the body of a convalescent. As with the tides, its ebb could not be checked nor its flow stimulated. I did not for one instant link it up with the bitter fact of toil. I thought of it rather as a free agent visiting man in his sin.

I shipped out, just as May first sketched it and then made it possible for me, as far as Five Forks; shipped out in the night, I remember, in a black smoker full of broken windows, in company with a gang of sweating Finns and Lithuanians and Laplanders. There I lay on the hot cushions, touring the world with my sweet May Gowdy. Fancy painted her gorgeously in miniature on the inside of my eyelids, and I simply couldn't bring myself to think that I had seen her for the last time. I would go out there to the west coast, study anatomy, work like a little fiend, set up as an osteopath, follow the trail of the lonesome spine, and May could have one room in the house for a little specialty shop—she had told me she dreamed

of having a specialty shop some day—to help out while we were getting on my feet—her feet—our feet.

I shook myself out of that dream and judged it must be nearly morning. It was time to start my get-away. I opened my suitcase, drew on my good clothes, laid out my straw hat, and slept half an hour more with my legs straight out to keep the crease in my pants. Then at Five Forks I shipped my friends by the simple expedient of jumping off the train, suitcase in hand, and looking supercilious.

Five Forks. I thought I had gone halfway across the world, and I felt as if I had done it on an empty stomach, too. If I could only get a bite to eat, everything would be jake. In place of that I got a job washing the windows of a restaurant. There I was on the sidewalk, with a long mop in my hands and a wooden tobacco pail full of hot water at my feet. Jove! I felt sheepish—and condescending, too—swabbing that window and glaring at broken-backed people in there devouring lamb stews and raisin pies! I reflected that Joe was soldiering at my age; and I could see May's inscrutable eyes turned my way, too, with that teasing, disbelieving light in them; the sort of light grown people have in their eyes when they listen to bragging children. I jammed that mop into the pail as if I was swabbing out the mouth of a cannon.

While I was eating my lamb stew a little later the fellow in there offered me four dollars a week for washing dishes. He kept mopping the counter

with a dirty rag while he talked, lifting salt shakers and mustard bowls and sugar basins and swabbing under them. I was nearly through supper then, and I simply stared at the man. It looked hard, it looked tough. And then I thought of May Gowdy and what a strangle hold on life she had, and I tackled the remnant of that lamb stew with better heart.

That night I started nailing freights—westbound freights—but they seemed to get a beforehand look at me and slide past when my back was turned. If I took the least cat nap I woke with a guilty start to find myself glaring at the tail light of some lurching caboose.

To guard against this I associated myself with an erstwhile sign painter's apprentice from Detroit, who impressed me by a quality of consistent enthusiasm. We were beaten off time and again, but that kid had an enchanting optimism; he had a ray of hope and a shout of triumph in either eye. Ultimately we jumped a cattle car.

I can see us now tearing along in the cinder path by the side of that freight like paid sprinters. I got a powerful odor in my nostrils. I saw those cows' heads going by, mild and numerous and speculative. I caught a glimpse of a gate in the middle of the last car, lunged for it. The Detroiter lunged for it and we landed together on the floor of the car in one mangled heap.

I opened the suitcase to put my straw hat away and get out a cloth traveling cap. What a success I thought I was then! Had jumped a live freight! What a fiery little genius of the road!

It was night. The stars were coming out. A flat wheel was limping and pounding under me, and I was rolling into the West at last. There wasn't a flaw in my position that I could see, outside of that flat wheel. I sat there on my upended suitcase, dreaming and telling myself that May Gowdy, bless her, would pay coin of the realm for the substance of those dreams.

I tried to tell that Detroiter something about her, but he had no use for women. He was going West to play ball with the Prairie League—ultimately. Play ball! Can you understand the faith he had in Providence? He had a big catcher's mitt run through the belt loop in his trousers by its wrist strings; and he spat in this glove, he caressed it, dented it, pounded it with his fist, and caught imaginary fly balls in the presence of that congress of cattle.

We were thrown at a town called Boone—hard. By George! I have terrible memories of Boone! Horrible! I thought I was never going to get out of it. Omaha looked as far away as the answer to a prayer.

I actually thought I was going to live down infinity in the shadow of those lumber piles, and the smell of that million or so feet of stacked pine is in my nostrils now. We lay on those boards until we carried impressions of knot holes all over our lean bodies; lay there and shivered nights and boiled days, and slept and hungered.

Hungry all the time. We made one feeble little strike for beers and failed. We made one attempt to panhandle for food, and the house we

selected was the house of the town marshal. We fled him down that dusty, sunny, hot old Iowa road like twin fiends and hid in a cattle pen. That night we did nail a freight, and then we were thrown into a swamp six miles out of Boone, and crawled back to the lumber piles, too hungry to sleep and too low in mind to talk—I was, at least. That Detroiter only hammered his glove harder. He was a visionary, one of these cheerful fatheads who don't know the meaning of conspiracy or disaster. Is it any virtue in the cork that it floats?

I woke up in that creeping blue-grim time just before the dawn. I felt as thin and empty as a paper bag, and morning discouragement began to flood into me. Nothing will shake your confidence in the moral order like that. You stand up in the half dark, bleared and unregenerate; and slowly the shacks and shanties begin to loom out of shadow, like monuments of woe, and you hear wheels turning and the rattle of harness in the gloom, the sound of horseshoes on cobblestones, and the coughing and cursing of the early risen.

Then you wonder how things hold together in this harsh world; yes, you wonder that the wheels turn, and you see the irony of a man's fate, thrusting him out of bed early when his luck is hard or his brain thick. What ghost of industry is it that starts these poor devils from their dreams at an hour when even a radish would come out of its bed hard?

A greasy hobo alongside the track was making

coffee in a jagged tomato can. He gave me a doughnut and a drink of that delicious brew; and after that I traveled with him and shipped the Detroiter. At first I was actually proud of having been selected by this hobo as a traveling companion. He had a kind of dark brute wisdom which made our journeying together as important as a tragedy, but I shipped him, too, somewhere this side of Omaha. He had too great a contempt for shacks and bulls.

I ought to have had an unrivaled sensation of triumph, coming into that town where May Gowdy had first seen the light, and perhaps I did have partly. I must have felt as if I had had a hand in creating it, and as if I had conjured it up there on the banks of that great river to verify my dreams; but over and above everything else, what I felt was the fierce pang of hunger. I hadn't had a square meal in days.

Do you know where I slept that night? It's in the diary. Here you see this symbol of a cross inside a circle? My hobo told me that means "You will get good treatment here" when you see it chalked up on a gate. I didn't use it for that, though. I put that down there to bring back to my mind the fact that I slept that night in an empty police ambulance. I didn't want to be found dead with that confession on my body, and that's why I used the symbol.

Isn't that quaint? But you've got to remember that I had lived all my life in that town where they make wooden minnows.

I wanted to hunt up May Gowdy's folks worse

than anything, but I wouldn't go there with that starvation look on my face, naturally. I toughed it out till morning in the ambulance, and then I got a job shoving a truck at the transfer platform—a piano in one load and a yeast cake in the next. I couldn't seem to come alive, though. I found myself wondering whether May's feet had ever rested on this very spot, and then I would hear that devilfish who was squirting tobacco juice and whipping up the slaves there yelling at me to stumble over, stumble over.

"What kind of a sleeping beauty are you?" he wanted to know, and he was too hoarse to listen to reason, too.

That night I borrowed half a dollar of a man—Nels Nelson, his name was—and got back my suitcase, which I had sent on ahead from one of those small towns where I had agonized overnight. I arrayed myself and started for May Gowdy's house. I found it as easily as if I had been returning to it in a dream. A wrinkled little white house, with a neat patch of lawn and a picket fence and a brick wall and nasturtiums growing round the cellar window. The lawn and the flowers had just been sprinkled. The wet hose was coiled up there on that brick wall where the bricks had been set in zigzag. There wasn't a hint of dust in the air, and the sun was low.

Mrs. Gowdy was standing at the gate, with a brown wart on the side of her nose and her hands crossed under her apron. She looked like home, you're darned right, and I don't know why I didn't mention right away that I was a friend of

May's. I think I was afraid of the effect that announcement might have on the family's opinion of May's city friends. Be that as it may, I merely asked her in a feeble voice if she would care to take a roomer, and a whole train of possibilities flashed in my brain when I put that up to her.

Possibly she would rent May's room, May not being home; in which case I might rummage around and find a glove or some like keepsake. I wonder if she suspected me of these designs of petty larceny.

She certainly gave me a long, musing look, and then said: "I don't know. I should have to ask Mr. Gowdy. Won't you come in?"

I went in. That little house was clean—it was clean, man. It frightened me to hear my feet grit on the linoleum in the hall. I was the only wreckage there. I remember sitting in the parlor, staring at an organ with an oak-leaf rack and a brown-plush stool, and thumbing the keys.

Mr. Gowdy turned out to be a big, bashful brute with freckled hands.

Mrs. Gowdy said: "This is Mr. McCarty, Paw. He wants us to take him in to room."

Gowdy said, "Where's he working?"

I told him.

Well, the upshot of it seemed to be that Mr. Gowdy didn't know whether to take me in or not. He looked at me as if this was the strangest problem that had ever come into his life, or into any man's life—something he couldn't have guarded against. He didn't know. Who in the world was going to tell him, where in the wilderness of

thought was he going to stumble on that necessary knowledge?

He rasped his finger across his chin and thought. Mrs. Gowdy thought, too, with her eyes fixed on the ceiling and her hands upon her apron. The house was as still as sorrow in the heart, and everything was slow. The clock ticked slowly like a ship's clock. It mooned at me with its cracked yellow dial, and shadows stole across the floor. Isn't it strange how my romantic May could come from this phlegmatic stock? I began to see how it was that she had run away and got into that rough man's game.

I was afraid to move, afraid to sigh or so much as crack a joint or twiddle a toe for fear of breaking the spell, and it was in that perfect silence that I heard a woman's voice raised impatiently on the other side of those folding doors.

May Gowdy's voice! She was here! She had come home! She had been beforehand with me! I knew that voice by some unnamable little quirk in it that nobody could mistake who had ever heard it, and you can well believe my heart was pounding and that little house began to look clear gold. I heard a man's voice next, and suddenly I saw that a good deal of this abstraction on the part of Mr. and Mrs. Gowdy was due to the fact that they were straining their ears to catch some of that and deal with me at the same time.

He said, "I guess we can, can't we, Mother?" and she nodded and cocked an ear at the folding doors again.

I began to be on pins and needles myself. I gawked at the house cat, which had come to a halt at the door and opened its mouth according to the voiceless gospel of some cats, as if inarticulate from sheer stress of emotion.

Mrs. Gowdy said, in tones of entire conviction, "That cat wants out."

She got up and let it out, too. Do you know, there was something habitual and serene in that act of common charity. It was a part of this completely calculable world of little things. I felt as if I were entering a calm. You get that same sensation drifting in the horse latitudes, they tell me—a sensation of being suspended between heaven and earth, somehow, and as if there never again would be so much as a ripple on the placid surface of things. I thought of May, there, right at my elbow, and how pat she would be to my domestic scheme; how she would slide into it as smooth as a bolt and bar out the world forever, and on the heels of that I heard the break-up behind those folding doors.

A heavy-set, pallid young man came scooting past the parlor door and out into the street like a madman. He nearly bent the street door outward on its hinges when he slammed it to, and right on his flying heels came May Gowdy herself, and the perplexity in her blue eyes gave way to astonishment and joy and shining welcome when she saw me.

"You've done it! You've done it, Bob McCarty! You've made the grade," she cried, and took one of my hands in both of hers.

I gave her my other one. She ran a shrewd eye over me from head to foot, and something seemed to catch in her throat, I thought.

"Why, you poor kid, you're as thin as a rail! It's positively awful!"

I got hold of her hand like a drowning man, and jerked out, "How are you, anyway?" and she said, "Swell."

Gad! it was affecting! We were like old friends—we *were* old friends, separated since the rose dawn of a young world, where we had foregathered unabashed.

You know what it is like, maybe, when you are learning a new instrument and drop it for a day or two and then pick it up again. You find you have more knack with it, if anything, than when you left off. That was how it was with May and me. She fairly crooned over me, and those expressions of pity brought a lump into my throat, I swear.

"What were you thinking of, you queer fish, hiring a room here?" May fired at me when the old people had told her what I had been up to. "What are friends for? Don't you know your money is counterfeit here? You certainly need a guardian. Come with me and I'll show you your room. I've got a thousand things to ask you."

I felt my eyes stinging me when I was following her upstairs. I was weak for lack of food, maybe; but over and over that, she *was* heart affecting. She seemed a different girl, too, here in her own bailiwick; softer and mellower, dressed as she was in that blue flowered contraption scattered over

with medallions of canary-yellow silk. That thing curled round her like a soft blue flame, opened at the throat in a misty circlet, and hung in at the hips affectionately. It was the last thing in accommodation. Even clothes clung to that girl, as I told Syd Hecker neatly later. How could he blame me?

"You're not really going farther West?" May asked me.

"Not while this town has all its present population," I said, and she laughed.

"The same old Bobolink. You certainly are long on sang-froid."

"How comes it you're here?"

"It's just that I needed a vacation, inquisitive," May said, and I wasn't too abashed to note that trace of irony and that quizzical glitter of the eye and swoop of the lashes. She was laughing at me.

I looked past her at the bed, which was certainly designed to contain two enormous people—staring white and cool and dimpled like a snow meadow. I put my fist into it deep and heaved a sigh. It was a feather bed.

"Think what this will mean to a man who has been sleeping on gravel!" I popped out.

"Gravel?" May shrieked.

"I came in on a gravel train."

"How could you, brought up as you have been? Well, *au revoir*. Hurry down, won't you? Take one of my brother's collars out of that right-hand upper bureau drawer, if it will fit. He'll never know it. He's on the road."

She shut the door. I washed up in a soft glow, and my heart exulted, exulted, exulted; and anything like sober thought was not for me. While I was reaming the cinders out of my ears I stared like an idiot at those companion pictures, "Before Marriage" and "After Marriage," one over the bureau and one on the door, and I certainly read favorable omens into those artless compositions. The frames were made of sea shells, and I could sit down to this day and draw either one of them free hand if I had knack with a pencil.

What luck! What road magic, to have that girl rise up in my path, in a breath, like the answer to a whisper whispered pleadingly into Fate's stone ear! I didn't believe she needed a vacation, either.

I brushed my clothes into shreds, curried and combed myself as lovingly as I knew how, shaved in cold water with her brother's shaving things, and coasted round the chin angles and jaw slants with anxious care, too. I didn't want to nick or mar my loveliness on this occasion.

Had she expected me? No matter, she was here. The world began for me here in this charming city, in this house, this secret citadel which the generality of men had passed up or passed by, tucked away as it was from everybody's eyes but the chief actors in the richest drama of the ages.

May and Omaha! What a prospect! A roof over me, a bed under me, a job ahead of me, that girl for my bright fireside angel, and the certainty of dying, if at all, only at an advanced age, with

my boots off and my toes up and the slate clean—here, by and by and after all.

She hadn't failed me. I had glimpsed so many beautiful faces, only to see them swallowed up in that maelstrom of our common humankind, that it seemed nothing short of miraculous to have one of them recur like this.

At supper I could clearly see that Mrs. Gowdy had been given her instructions.

"I'm not going to make company of you," she said. "May has told us all about you, and we feel as if you were one of the family almost."

She made me feel it, too. I don't know how I got my drag with that good woman. My prospects couldn't have looked very rosy from where she sat, and she couldn't have been fool enough to think I had come there on account of the shape of the house or the way the chimney drew. I know now, of course, that she was hoping I would prove an antidote for that specific poison, Jim Harper. He had got too far away from home to be available. He never had been available, for that matter, in the view of the Gowdy conclave.

"He never seemed to want to settle down, for one thing," Mrs. Gowdy told me, privately. We had strolled into the parlor and were waiting for May to come down from upstairs and carry me off to what her mother referred to as "one of her shindigs at the gymnasium." "No principle, as I told Mr. Gowdy that first night, when she came towing him in. I didn't like his eyes, and I told her so; but the man seemed to carry that girl right off her feet from the go-off. I don't

know how to account for it. She always had kept her head so well before, where men were concerned, and I used to say there was safety in numbers."

"Numbers?" I uttered, smilingly, but I felt as if the mask had been torn from my face.

I suffered a contraction of the walls of the heart. I felt as if somebody had gripped that organ with an invisible hand that went through the chest wall as if it was nothing, and got its thumb and finger on the dictating ganglion that, when left alone, you understand, forces the heart to go on beating willy-nilly.

"Numbers, yes," Mrs. Gowdy went on. "I'd like to see anyone keep track of them. Of high and low degree, too. Of course it was all just for the good time they could give her, as far as that goes. Girl-and-boy affairs."

"Girl and boy—yes, certainly," I muttered, feebly.

"For that matter, she's come through it all with colors flying by always being the lady," that fond mother said. "I've always made it a point to tell her that anybody doesn't have to advertise the fact that they're a lady, and people learn to act accordingly. I don't know whether you've seen his picture or not?"

She lifted it down from the runner on the organ, a cabinet photograph done in sienna, in an oval silver frame. I knew him in a second. I knew those shallow eyes, the eyes of a depredator and a woman killer; those full lips, that wisp of a mustache over the upper one, and that mass of

limp black hair with its specialty cut. The temples were practically shaved, and the hair was combed well back, and showed the comb tracks all the way.

Good-looking, yes. A good kid, a good spender, and a good loser, May had said, and I didn't doubt her—but I shared Mother Gowdy's fears about the man the instant I laid eyes on him.

"He's not the man for her, Mrs. Gowdy," I said, earnestly. "I've studied physiognomy, and I know what I'm talking about."

"He can lie faster than two horses can trot," she said, impressively; "but you tell May that and she only fires up in his defense."

"You have to play iron—you can't force it," I said, sagely, and I added in heartfelt tones that it would be a miserable thing for so fair a creature to fall into the wrong hands.

"She wouldn't have deserved it," I faltered, and Mrs. Gowdy was thoroughly in accord.

"I know, but what's anybody going to do?" she whimpered. "She's headstrong, and she wraps her father right round her little finger."

"She's a modern from crown to toe," I thrust in.

"I used to think," Mrs. Gowdy said, dolefully—"I know I told Mr. Gowdy before she was born that I hoped it would be a girl, because girls were more comfort to the mother, somehow; they didn't get out into the world so early, and then they were more manageable. But my sorrows, she kicked over the traces and picked up a man's trade—or just as good as—and left us before she came of age. She might just as well

have been a boy, for all that she'd have acted any different."

"I sized her up as one that would leave the nest as soon as she found out she had wings," I put in.

Mrs. Gowdy sighed out: "She has so much poise, don't you know. Altogether too much, I say. Nothing fazes her. She might have been made love to half a dozen times this summer for all she would come to me with it. I can't tell what she's thinking half the time. She doesn't confide. Young girls nowadays have that ability to wipe telltale expressions off their faces just as smooth as you could do it with an iron.... Sh—sh! That's her step on the stair."

May swept in, glowing in her pink-and-white-striped coat, and wearing the little hat with heckle feathers on it that I had seen adorning the newel post.

"Turn round," her mother commanded.

May pirouetted.

"Well, I guess it will pass muster. Do you like it as well as you did when you got it?"

"Why, mother, what a question! I just love it! I could eat it!"

But as soon as the front door had shut on us May chuckled. "Don't you tell my mother for the world, but I'm beginning to loathe this striped coat. It just seems as if all creation was appearing out in them. I wish now I'd bought the tan one in combination with some bright-colored sweater, just as she advised. I haven't made friends with my hat, either."

I lavished praise on that hat, and May put her cool hand over my mouth.

"Naughty Bobolink, you only say that! My face looks a perfect moon in it, and Jim told me so before he left. I wish I had taken the sand-colored one that looked like the Desert of Sahara with a rose dropped in it. What were you and mother talking about?"

May always did believe in the direct attack.

"Don't fib to me," she went on in a rush of words. "I know. She set Jim's picture back at the wrong angle. I couldn't see the light on it as I came in. I suppose you know the whole family is up in arms against me when it comes to Jim. They're simply wild, and I don't know what they've got against him. He's one of the best quarter-milers in the state, and I think athletes are apt to go straight if for no other reason than to keep in the pink of condition. Don't you?"

I couldn't say, of course, not having been an athlete.

"Perhaps you're a brain athlete, though," May shot at me with a lingering spur of light in those astonishing blue eyes. I pleaded not guilty to that indictment, too, and May was kind enough to say that I reminded her of Jim strikingly. We both had that hollow in our cheeks that gave us just a darling hint of the ascetic, and May was mad about ascetics.

"You flatter me," I said, huskily.

"Well, of course, not that you have his physique, quite," she qualified; "but you're awfully alike in little things, like having consideration for the

girl, and not creeping too much mush into your talk, and remembering to walk on the outside. You both have little bashful ways, too. You really are bashful, do you know that, Bobolink, you great boy? Have you had much to do with women?"

That direct attack was certainly withering. I was caught either way, unless I could strike the proper pitch of sophistication and satire, and I couldn't strike it. May laughed and pressed against me.

"Don't apologize. You *are* refreshing. I never could get on with these blasé men, and it really does add to you, in a woman's eyes, when she knows that there really is at bottom a touch of the devil in you for the right one to wake. I only hope you don't make my mistakes."

I stumbled over a brick in the sidewalk that some long-ago frost had heaved up, and I confess now that I hadn't much more chance to jump aboard a conversation like that than to nail a fast freight, and I knew it. I stood still, goggle-eyed, and it went by me and by me, with glimpses of daylight in between. And impulse on impulse, I felt the tide of love whispering fuller and clearer, rising, rising, brimming at my throat, at my nostrils, like a sweet enemy, as Swinburne says. Fluid death. Arm in arm with that radiant bit of femininity, as I was, I couldn't sense it that we were really dated up for the first time this evening. Surely I had known her intimately on the threshold of life, and was now gliding back, as into a remembered street, where some haunting

quality in the dusk bids us stand still and remember. The battle ground of hearts once, now only of memories and ghosts of memories, piercing sweet to the man meshed and entrapped in those nets of circumstance thrown by the conquering devils of chance.

I formulated that thought for May, and she said I certainly could come through strong when it came to slinging English.

"I'll have to leave you in the cage here during the drill," she said.

We had got into the gymnasium, and I prowled back and forth in that cage like a panther, looking out through wire netting to the gymnasium floor in company with a gathering throng of young men, among whom I spotted Sydney Hecker, that pallid young man I had seen running out of the house of Gowdy at top speed.

I struck up conversation with him right away, and he played flint to my tinder. When I told him I was a stranger in a strange land, and that May had taken pity on me and brought me here, he looked at me as if he thought me capable of arguing that religion itself was only fake insurance.

"She's a pretty keen girl," I vouchsafed. "This Jim Harper is a lucky man."

"Just at present," Syd ground out, and I bent toward him confidentially.

"Is she quite so crazy about him as she gives out?" I whispered. "Isn't there just a chance that absence makes the heart grow fonder—of the other fellow?"

His mouth had the loose flexibility and deep

corners of a cod's mouth, and he shut it against me. I made no effort to pry it open, because the wand drill was on, and I feasted my eyes on that squad of fifty girlish figures rising and falling, charging and recoiling, a hundred slim arms flashing and weaving there all in unison, self-forgetful and superb; and my supple May at the head of the phalanx, rolling the wand over her shoulder blades with clever little twists and tautenings. The sight of those white arms in action thrilled me like a note of martial music. I glared through the mesh, and when I thought about that something elusive in her character that made it hard for her to make friends permanently with her clothes I plucked up enormously.

There was a dance after the exercises. She came to me direct from her locker, in blue satin, with the tiniest of silk shoulder straps, no wider than that intriguing little mole on her left shoulder blade, just where the up-and-down wrinkle came when she shrugged her shoulders. If I haven't mentioned that before it's only because I hadn't seen it.

I looked into those eyes, and they tranced, they rested me, just as the dancing points of a rare gem or a wood fire have a mesmeric effect on the dreaming brain. She couldn't be with me for more than a minute, though, because the music was starting up, and she was pledged for her first dance—just the first—with Sydney Hecker.

"He needs consoling, and sometime I'll tell you why," she cried.

Flushed and sparkling, she was all for sweeping

me into some other woman's arms, when I told her somberly I didn't dance.

"Don't dance?" she exclaimed. "Oh, I can't believe that! Well, you are fresh from the mint, aren't you?"

I began feeling weak in the epigastrium again, and I would have sold myself into slavery for the power to imitate those foppish churls who acknowledged a waxed floor as their native element.

May hooked her friend Laura Milburn by the elbow and got her to take pity on me and show me some of the new steps. Laura was full-bodied and a little sluggish, but she had hair the color of corn silk, and raven brows, and steel-gray eyes, and the gentlest, prettiest of voices—the voice of a woman who has suffered much. She took me in hand out among the chest weights and the flying rings, in that niche containing a plaster cast of the world's leading woman athlete.

"I'm afraid I can't make much of a fist of this," I said, huskily. "You can't teach an old dog new tricks."

I tried to speak like an old battle-scarred veteran whose time had been too strictly passed in feats of arms and derring do to acquire these soft graces, and Laura took that stuff at face valuation. We got talking about Jim Harper—it's wonderful the number of people I found who were willing to talk about Jim—and Laura turned those great, sad eyes of hers on me, under those enchanting brows, and murmured, "I do hope she'll make him happy."

"Is there any doubt?" I pressed her.

"There's always doubt," Laura said, "where two people are as strong characters as they are. One or the other will have to bend the knee, and I'm afraid it won't be May. He's the grandest man to get along with, really, if a girl will only learn his ways and when not to oppose him."

"Not your ideal of a lady's man, I gather. Not the kind that will knuckle to a whim."

"Not at all. That's why so many lost their heads. He just had always been able to draw them by crooking his little finger, and you can't wonder if even that got to be too much exertion for him finally. I know. I was singed myself, and I know if there's one thing Jim stands out for more than another it's womanly women. He put up with May's dragging him about from one shooting gallery to another while he was courting her; but marriage is different. Don't you think so yourself?"

"Shooting galleries?" I gasped. "Does she countenance that sort of thing?"

"Yes. Didn't you know that? She's nuts about guns, and they say there isn't a woman in the state that can touch her for target shooting. She used to run up quite a bill for clay pigeons, too, in the season. She's mad to go West now and join Jim, and I really think that's half his lure. She's awfully romantic."

A curious shock went through me, and I thought I knew why Jim wouldn't like May's developing proficiency with guns. It struck me as incongruous myself that that delicate beauty could

take anything like a rifle in her hands with satisfaction and credit to herself.

There wasn't time to develop that thought, though. May came whirling up, released from Sydney Hecker, and took me in hand, guiding me out among the horses, bucks, and parallel bars.

"Now we'll see whether or not you can dance, or whether you're just plain Mister Modesty," May said, with resolution in her tones.

Well, I had taken one or two dancing lessons from a homely girl back there in Dowagiac, but that was before I had learned to see possibilities in every woman's face, and her nearness didn't count. May's introduction of me to things terpsichorean was a far cry from that affair.

"I'm mad about dancing," she said; "perfectly mad about it. Once I'm on the floor, with speedy music, and a pair of stalwart arms around me, I don't look above the shoulder seam. Actually, I'm hardly conscious who my partner is if he can dance. Shameful, isn't it? Their brains or build don't count with me then. It's the way they handle their feet."

I grinned in ghastly fashion and said, helplessly, "My feet have got nothing but their cubic contents, I'm afraid."

"He's just putting that on, don't you girls think so?" she tossed over her shoulder to three or four of her consortless companions who couldn't for their dear lives help gravitating toward that splendid alabaster nude in the alcove as a vantage point.

My hands felt as big as gin carries, and my legs

were spavined and covered with Charley horses when I essayed to sway into it with her and failed.

May said: "Well, the bottom hasn't fallen out of everything, yet, I hope."

"You can't teach an old dog new tricks," I said, miserably.

I shouldn't have risked making that crack a second time. It went through with Laura, but it left me open wide with May, and she hopped into the breach hard.

"Hear the man! Anyone would think he was seventy-four at least. Why, how old are you, Mr. McCarty?"

She had called my bluff, and I don't know to this day what I said in answer to that body blow. I think I told her the truth. I had the crumpled, collapsed feel of a man hit wickedly amidships and dropping to the mat for the count. I got a taste of May's poise, too, during the half minute—or half century—while she was waiting for my reply without taking her interested eyes off mine. She didn't lose one opportunity in those early clinches to get under my guard with some little piece of outspokenness that gave me the old mazed, glassy-eyed, boiled-in-oil feeling that girls seemed to have power to plant in me, and that feeling alone would have made recluses of better men.

"Do you know, Mr. McCarty," she said to me, "I think you must be just a little bit conceited."

"Conceited?"

That was a right chop to the jaw, and my head snapped over.

"Yes. You act as though you thought every-

one in this place were looking at you. They've got other business to attend to. Now can't you just forget you are dancing altogether, and just sway into it, and give yourself up to it as if you meant to enjoy yourself? Crack a smile. We only pass this way once, you know; and if there *is* any little thing that can give pleasure, don't you think, instead of always denying ourselves, we ought to? There, isn't this divine?"

It's a fact, the coy motion of her body seemed to oscillate the air along her flanks, and for a second I was lapped in Elysium. And then I stepped on her, and groaned apologies.

May said: "You're awfully sensitive, aren't you? Or susceptible, or something of the sort. I'm perfectly all right. Not in pain the least bit. Do I look it? Really, I never think anything about getting stepped on when I'm dancing. You've got to expect it. There, just let yourself go, and limber up the knees."

I told her humbly that one of my great difficulties had always been to keep from climbing my partner.

"Climbing your partner?" May repeated, aghast. "You do have an awfully funny way of putting things. Has anything happened, when you were younger, to put a crimp in your vocabulary? Now. Why, you are doing it like a veteran! I wish I had never had worse partners than you are to dance with. All you need now is experience and you'll be wonderful. You're so strong and carry yourself so well. What step are you introducing there, Mr. McCarty?"

"Something that just came into my head."

"Well, you are progressing! There, you see you've taught me something!"

I had it on the tip of my tongue to say "Impossible," and for just that second all the ligaments and muscles and pulleys in my face ached with the effort to keep a civil expression moored there, and yet the upshot of all that tension was that I lisped, "It isn't much."

"Yes, it's good. I like to do it."

"I'm afraid I'm not turning enough. Isn't it getting a little monotonous for you?"

"Turn as often as you like. I'll turn with you, never fear."

"What signal shall I give you?"

"Oh, I'll know without signaling," May said, and I flashed out:

"Can you actually divine my thoughts so soon?"

May whipped back, "When they're not too far afield I can," and I stepped on her again.

"Don't mind that. It happens with the very best dancers. Just imagine that a girl is armor-plated. Now try to glide. Don't act as if you were trying to get somewhere. You're not catching a train, Mr. McCarty. Look, here we are in mid-stream! Don't get panicky. You're doing fine. You won't mind this little motion of mine, will you? It isn't quite conventional, but I do love to be a little raggy. There, the music has stopped."

When she passed me on to my next partner, as if she had forged and fashioned me from a crude lump of precious ore, she said, sweetly, "Don't you let this wonderful man tell you he can't dance, Ethelberta."

CHAPTER III

BY George! What impressed me was the enormous cleverness she showed in handling material as rough as I was and getting away with it big! Nothing fazed her. Mrs. Gowdy had said that, and Mrs. Gowdy knew. She looked like a mere slip of a girl, and yet I felt that she must have been out in the world fending for herself ages and ages before I had taken my first step.

"What did you think of Laura?" she asked me when we were going home that night. I said noncommittally that Laura ought to sit to some sculptor for her lines.

"She has a beautiful torso, yes," May agreed. "Of course, though, physique isn't everything."

"It helps," I dropped out with an appreciative slant at her own perfections.

After a discreet pause she said, in her soft, slighted accents: "You wouldn't have any way of knowing it unless I told you, but she was Jim's inamorata before he met me."

"Ah," I said, fatuously, "it's all off now, of course!" and May retorted, "*Cela va sans dire*," delicately, and with a good deal of aplomb, it seemed to me.

"I suppose your conscience is clear," I said, archly, and to my surprise May said she wasn't sure.

"I'm not so sure she wouldn't have been the woman for him, after all," she went on, murmurously, "and I told him so once. He simply wouldn't have it, and it would just about have killed me to have to give him up, but I wanted to be perfectly fair."

"What was your idea at that time, may I ask?"

"I told him we were too much alike. Like repels like, you know, and attracts its opposite."

"How—alike?"

"Well, we're both birds of passage, for one thing," she said, reflectively. "Always looking for excitement and what's in the wind, instead of being willing to settle down and just watch the pot and mend socks and go round and lock the doors and windows when the clock strikes nine. People criticized Jim because he used to spend his time, when he was away from me, always and forever drawing to a bob-tailed flush, but I couldn't blame him in my heart of hearts."

She was just as frank as a comrade in arms. When she had exhausted Jim she turned to Sydney Hecker and gave me a thumb-nail sketch of him. It seems he had come just before Jim Harper, and, sandwiched in as he had been between two much more violent affairs, he had grown to feel rather morose about it all. Yes, ludicrous as it might seem now, Sydney Hecker had at one time been all in all to her, and no woman, she averred, was ever likely to forget totally even her eliminations, much as she might like to.

Sydney was too absurd. He represented himself now as being in a mood for anything, though

really he hadn't anybody but himself to blame. He had actually threatened to ruin his life by going West in charge of a sheep car unless she would relent and take him back. To do this he would have to drop a lucrative job at the bank. Fancy that!

"That's what jealousy can do for a man," she said, mildly. "He's jealous. It's terrible, according to his version. I've always said jealousy must be a form of disease, and I still think so. I think anybody is more to be pitied than anything else that is of a jealous disposition. Don't you?"

"I suppose you never had a touch of it yourself," I suggested.

May shook her head and truth looked out of those brilliant eyes. Right there I remembered a sentiment I had scrawled in my diary—"They conquer who think they can"—and it came seething over me that May might not be totally inaccessible even to a late comer like myself. Hadn't she worn out her eye on that striped coat and the hat with the heckle feathers? What was to prevent her wearing out her relish elsewhere, then?

And so for a solid week May and I attended things. She devoted her entire evenings to me, and wrote Jim about our doings with girlish exuberance, and once even went so far as to dictate a letter to him and dispatch it, written throughout in my fine Italian hand. Jim would see the humor of that, she said. He wouldn't mind. He didn't believe in turning an engaged woman into a mere prisoner of hope, unless he was a much changed man from what he had been.

So smooth had been our course that I was little prepared for that bombshell she threw into camp at the end of seven days. I flattered myself that I would go far in my role of supplanter, and I won't refrain from saying that I couldn't believe a woman who had even partially habituated herself to my style could find it in her heart to look elsewhere. I felt sure that if I were a woman other men would repel me by their grossness, and I couldn't understand even the faintest encouragement of their advances by May.

Imagine my surprise, then, on going downstairs one night after prolonged study of the picture entitled "After Marriage," to find the family all shot to pieces, Gowdy looking like a thundercloud, and Mrs. Gowdy dissolved in tears, and a saturated solution at that. I checked myself in the doorway, but May wheeled round and dragged me in.

"Come in, you friend of the family," she said to me, "and listen to these lamentations. You would think bedlam had broken loose, and all because I have decided to go West and join Jim."

"Join—Jim?"

"Yes. Now don't you go to looking like the last leaf after it has withered and gone! I know my own mind, I hope!"

"I say they don't any of them know their own minds any more," Mrs. Gowdy moaned. "What she sees in that four-flusher!"

"Why I fall for that four-flusher, as you call him," May flashed out, "is because he's doing something more in the world than just count out dirty dollars at a bank. He's a man, and he's

had the courage to strike out for himself, without asking whether he had support from the chamber of commerce or not. And now if there's any way that I can devise to come through in the pinches—"

"I guess there will be pinches enough and tears enough before you're done with him," her mother sobbed. "I don't know as he's anything better than a common gambler."

May turned to me and explained patiently that her mother thought everybody was a gambler who dealt in stocks and bonds.

"That's all old stuff," she reasserted. "My heavens, ma, can you think of any easier way of growing rich than getting it out of the dirt under your feet? Why, if you had a chance to go round picking up gold dollars out of the street I don't believe you'd stoop! Jim wrote me about an old man that came out there and stumbled on a glory hole and shoveled gold into sacks like so much powdered sugar. Everybody had told him that the place had petered out, too, mind you. And Jim says now he's worth his cool half million."

"It won't do him any good," Mrs. Gowdy moaned.

"Don't be narrow, ma," May said, in those gentle tones, and I certainly admired the way she held herself in.

And right there, when everything hung in the balance, we all heard that distinct and imperative sound outside, accompanied by a scratching. You can't conceive the effect of that minute sound on those depressed elderly people. They lifted their

heads as if they had been brought suddenly out of some dark depth, as if they were awakening after a dream of murder, to feel about them the blessed, soothing sanity of the bedroom walls and the sound of loved ones' breathing.

We all stared at the black window, as if cut short in our several concerns by some decree coming from a high source, and Mrs. Gowdy wiped away her tears and said, gravely, "That cat wants in."

The entrance of that cat effected a revolution in my soul. Can you understand this? It's psychological, I suppose. There I had been on the point of throwing the weight of my personality into the scales in a mad effort to dissuade May from that Western trip. I imagine I expected some sort of dream compliance out of her, too—she did smile at me strangely, with a glitter in her eyes; that fateful glitter—and I had almost burst out with that story of an uncle of mine who went out there in the gold days and came back after three years, limping into town with one lonesome nugget in the heel of his shoe that he had earned by washing dishes after he had sickened of panning for gold; and when he saw how high feeling ran about the way he had left his wife to shift for herself all those weary years he rammed that nugget into his gun and shot himself with it.

Well, I had all but spilled that pessimistic yarn when the cat came clawing under the sash and dropped on the carpet. Gad! that furry face had every mark of the uncharitable coldness of a contemptuous foreigner domineering in a strange land!

I began to think of life here, or in any given spot, as a series of reiterated exits and entrances on the part of this creature. There was something terrible to me in this manifestation of a subtle autocracy. I felt loaded down with chains. This bold green stare seemed to point directly to that perishing point in the monotony of days I've spoken about. Let it in, let it out, let it in, let it out, Just Heaven, no!

I felt that what May craved was not so much Jim as open air. I did myself. I saw plainly that I had been almost seduced from the road by a bag of feathers and a sheet; but suddenly I felt strong again, and I got a rich picture of the perils of the road alleviated by May's presence. I wanted action right away, in order not to suffer a relapse, and I maneuvered May out into the hall under that wine-colored lamp with an incandescent inside in place of a wick, and glass pendants. And there in that romantic light I told her I was strong for that adventure of hers, and what was more, I meant to check her up on it.

"When are you going?" I inquired.

"The day after to-morrow."

"Does Jim know it?"

"No; he'll get the surprise of his young life. I'm simply going to walk in on him unawares."

"You'll have me to back you up," I gritted. "I am heading for the Canyon of the Fools myself."

"Don't be foolish!" May said, and then I got the foolish little smile working that always brought the query as to what was in my mind.

I warmed to my work. I was half tempted to take her by storm, sweep her off her feet, guarantee her all the open air she wanted in exchange for the padlock of wedlock. And she read me like a book of print.

"You mad boy!" she whispered, with her cheek against the banister. "Go on where you were going and never think of poor me again."

"It's too large an order," I affirmed.

I was looking square into her eyes, and do you know I distinctly saw something scintillating there like a surprising liquid. I was amazed. It took me right in the knees and over the heart hard. I hadn't supposed there would ever be a suggestion of tears in those quizzical eyes.

Well, it's a great moment when a man realizes that he has brought a beautiful girl to the verge of tears on his account. I felt like crying myself and coming all unglued. I was maudlin, I tell you. And what defeated me was May's never losing her self-possession for one instant. Right when I felt the glow of that crisis through my heart she stepped up to me close. I knew then that I wanted her for my very own. Wanting her made the fact stand out that she was near. I made it nearer, and it might have ended as it always does if she hadn't breathed, naturally as a child, "Do you know—I think—I have got a cinder working around in my eye. Will you look?"

A cinder! Wasn't that a step-down for me? There I had been all but reduced to a thin jelly, and by what? Involuntary tears! Add historic

might-have-beens. I twisted up a corner of my handkerchief with one shaking hand and came closer still, and wasn't I fearful to touch the appurtenances of that enchanted orb? I glared, and we both held our breath, and I rolled back the lid with a hand that felt as wide-fluked as a ship's anchor.

I said, anxiously, "I don't see a thing."

"I've wept it out," May said, composedly. "But truly it felt as big as—as a nugget of gold."

She was full of the old mischief that night.

"Promise me," she said, "that you'll stay here at the transfer, like a good boy, and let mother take care of you."

I got her by the two shoulders and looked her straight in the eye.

"Look here," I said, "you know better than that! You know where I'll be! I want you to remember that when everything else fails you've got me to bank on. I'm not asking anything for myself. I'm just putting it up to you that you've got me in reserve, that's all. I'm trekking right along until I see you safe into Jim Harper's hands."

May said, "Really?" and there was a touch of that old roguish, disbelieving light in her eye.

"Yes, really. If there really is a canyon where fools foregather, the sooner I find it the sooner I will find home."

"Silly! But if you do mean it, honestly, why don't you join Sydney Hecker in his sheep car? And then if it should so happen that you should

get out of funds you could pawn that snake ring of his with the imitation ruby in it."

I wasn't listening. I was thinking to myself: "I wonder if she would stand for a farewell kiss. I wonder how she would take it."

I gave up the notion, though. I fancied that any such juxtaposition was bound to be momentous and might detonate like a pinch of blasting powder. We might even lose our lower jaws.

And right while I was thinking that, she brushed by me in a flash and kissed me with a kind of dewy, thoughtful air, and said: "Forget it like a good boy, Bobolink, and go to Los just as you intended."

I was warm all over, and at the same time I was mad clear through at the absence of any sort of passion in that kiss—like a young mother's after she has tidied up her little boy and got him ready for school. And I had made the mistake of reckoning myself in with the primal forces which women have to take account of in this world. I had been willing to take that kiss out in thinking. I suppose I must have lacked that masterful knack of working fast in women's impulses that people say I have since acquired—and hanged if she didn't pay it in like legal tender! She certainly brought me up with a round turn by that endearment. A tear had been lingering on her cheek or in the corner of her mouth, somewhere, salty sweet. It was like being kissed by an opening bud that had been dipped in sea water.

I turned my back on her, broken-hearted, banged the door, and went stumbling along that

brick walk in the dark, following the zigz pattern. I stopped at the gatepost and clung it. I had a piece of chalk in my pocket, and pulled it out and put a cross inside a circle on t front side of the post.

Whimsical little devil, wasn't I? Well, I *h* had good treatment there.

CHAPTER IV

WHERE was it I first came up with Sydney Hecker? It's not down here in the diary, for some reason or other. It was at a place where there was some sort of tough carnival going on, I remember, and the sun was sinking. I heard a minister once describe life as a thing roaring along like a sunset. "Roaring" is the word for that sun. It was like a prairie fire, and the light glittered on the rails and I thought I had never seen so far in one straight line before.

I wish I could prepare your mind to receive the character of that perplexing Christian, Sydney Hecker, but I can't. I never understood it myself, never fathomed it. He was short and thickset, with a moon face, a bell-shaped nose, pale, bulbous eyes, and an undershot jaw. May told me frankly that what she had admired in the man was his good grip on morals, not his facial equipment.

Here he was, sure enough, just as she had said, in charge of a sheep car, rolling west and trying to find balm for his defeated soul, instead of getting out and providing May Gowdy with more close-ups of his moral worth. We hated each other on sight, but I meant to journey out of there in his sheep car, and I boarded him without com-

punction. He gave no sign of ever having seen me, and I humored him in that. I chimed in with him and helped him fill a tin washtub with water for the sheep, and then when the train started I climbed pleasantly in over the gate in the middle of the car.

He said at once, "Of course you know you have no right to be here."

I laughed and said I supposed he wouldn't mind if I trundled out a mile or two to see the sunset. He looked as cold and wavering as a cuttlefish, and he fixed those protuberant eyes on me without a grain of sympathy or companionship in them.

After he had watered the sheep he asked me if I had ever heard of Jim Harker. I hadn't. He enlightened me. Jim Harker was, it seemed, a bull with a festive little trick of riding down freights on his broncho and roping hobos with a rope made of excellent Mexican horsehair.

"Rope them right off a moving train?" I inquired.

And Sydney Hecker said, "Yes," heavily and sadly.

"Did you say 'is a man' or 'was a man'?"

"He's dead," Sydney answered, briefly. "A hobo hit him on the head with a coupling pin. But his brother is still out here at Sherry Hill."

"Roping 'em?"

Sydney nodded. I opened my heart to him then because I certainly did want to see that sunset on the prairie. I showed him my frat pin and told him an uncle of mine by marriage was a

Mason and an Odd Fellow, and that I was going to Los Angeles to study medicine. It would have been poor policy to have said flat-footed that I was on the trail of the one woman in the world.

"Hide me, mister!" I whispered to him. "Oh, my golly! Let me hide under the sheep at Sherry Hill!"

"No," he said, resolutely.

"What harm?"

"No right," he mumbled. "You have no right here."

Right! He handled that word reverently, but we were getting close to Sherry Hill, and suddenly I felt the train slacken, and right away I saw Jim Harker's brother loping along in the cinders away up the track.

I hissed in Sydney Hecker's ear, "I am going under the sheep," and he made absolutely no answer. It was like appealing to a gilt Buddha.

"Are you going to give me away?"

"If he asks me," he said, throatily, "I shall tell him."

Where had I got a whiff of those ethics before?

I glared at him and said, rapidly: "Suppose you were at a crossroads and a man ran by you that you knew was innocent being chased by murderers. If those murderers came up and wanted to know which way he went, which way would you point?"

With a truly noble gesture Sydney folded his arms and said, "I should refuse to answer."

Wasn't that a perfectly safe solution?

"Look here," I yelled, "you call yourself a Christian!"

I hadn't the faintest notion that he would, but to my surprise he fired up and said yes, he did.

"And still," I said, "you are going to throw a fellow Christian to a blood-bitten bull like Jim Harker's brother. Is that Christian spirit?" And without giving him a chance to answer I crawled under the sheep.

They were rams. By George! it was close! I thought I should perish, lying there with all that belly wool tickling my face. I felt entombed and forsaken, and I looked for nothing better from that short-faced tumbler of a sheep king than betrayal. Jim Harker's brother came by and I heard him draw alongside and ask Syd how many sheep there were in his car. Syd hadn't counted. Going far? Some place in the Far West, Syd thought.

I kept thinking, "Beat again, little heart!" and I could hear the hearts of those rams ticking, too, I believe, like a lot of alarm clocks wrapped in wool.

Every instant I thought Sydney was going to drop the onus of that deception, fling it from him with one stern gesture, and invite Jim Harker's brother to burrow under those rams.

Well, he didn't do it. For some unfathomable reason he preferred to compromise his morality. Had he been actuated by regard for me? It's unlikely. I shall think to my dying day that Sydney was afraid to tell that sheriff that I was in with the sheep. He was afraid of awkward questions. Why had he let me get under there

at all, for instance? Why hadn't he put me off himself?

His ethics had undone him, and suddenly that freight gave a savage jerk and creaked in all its members. Springs tinkled, brake beams groaned, and all the rams jumped one way and planted their hoofs in my face.

That was how Syd and I began our wanderings together. We hit it off fine, too. This was a slatted box-car, you understand. A platform extended over the sheep's heads aft, containing hay, a worn blanket, and a tin pail into which Sydney had thrust a grimy cylinder of Bologna sausage, a mass of pilot bread, and a hundredweight or so of ginger snaps—his idea of what to take with him on his vacation in the way of food. It was characteristic of the man.

As soon as I had worked the hay up against the slats all round to screen myself from the wind and the brakies I prepared to take my ease. It was impossible. Sydney had got the moral problem in his teeth again, and was worrying it.

He came up to me and said, in a low tone: "You are committing a sin by remaining in this car, and you know it. You've got to get off."

I asked him why he hadn't put me off at Sherry Hill if that was how he felt about it, and he moaned out something about my being the kind of man who would throw that up to him after he had given me a chance for my life.

"Certainly," I said, "you ought to have done it."

He inquired piteously if I meant to impose on his good nature like that. It got dark, and still

we argued. The joy of it was, he had three times my strength physically. He could have pitched me off anywhere, and he preferred to argue me off and suffer the torments of the damned because I wouldn't succumb to argument. What man worthy of the name ever did succumb to anything so insubstantial?

"Do you know," he ejaculated at one time, "that you are actually robbing this company—robbing it?"

I felt that every minute spent in this conversational way was bringing me nearer to May Gowdy again. He shrieked those last two words at me, and I picked them right out of the air.

"Robbing the company!" I said, as calm as a preacher after a spell of ranting.

I became a sophist. The company, hey? What was the company? It was a corporation. What was a corporation. A thing without a soul. Could you commit an ethical wrong on a thing without a soul? Certainly not. What was ethics? A system of moral adjustment between creatures having living tissue. Corporations had no living tissue, bloodless and inhuman monsters. Therefore—

He glared at me with ponderous mistrust and muttered: "There is something wrong with that reasoning. The corporation is nothing but the men who compose it."

There was a wild wailing or whistling ahead, and in a second we had plunged into a tunnel. As soon as we emerged I gasped for breath and yelled: "Wait till the corporation gets in court,

and watch them deny that! They want to say then that a corporation is a separate entity, something all by itself."

He shook his head.

"It's against the law, and that ought to be enough," he mumbled.

You see? He had shifted off the moral ground—against the law.

I said, earnestly, "Would you stake your soul on the proposition that this corporation has never sinned against the law?"

"That doesn't concern you," he said, proudly, sternly. "If you look after your own conduct and let others look after theirs you'll get on better."

I got off the hay platform in order to face him more impressively.

"That's precisely what I say to you," I said.

Would you believe that anybody could be struck dumb by a flimsy counter thrust like that? Well, he was. He said nothing at all for what seemed hours and hours, and the countryside went by in a blur. It was night. We were both leaning on the gate at this time. We were like a couple of somber farmers, with the gate under our elbows and the sheep beginning to bleat behind us. A live-poultry car had hooked on behind, too. The illusion of a traveling farm was perfect, and I think this was all that kept him from going to pieces. He had been brought up on a farm, and now his mental poise seemed to depend on the grip he had on that gate. He was all but turned inside out with homesickness, for one thing.

We slept together on the platform under the same blanket. Can you imagine it? And then in the morning he was wrathier than ever at what he called the false position I had put him in. He had been thinking of this all night while we were lying under that blanket. Had tossed and turned and hardly got a wink of sleep, and the burden of it all was, I was immoral, a moral bankrupt, I hadn't a scruple. That man actually appeared to have lived in a world where scruples had more currency than shekels or rupees. He referred to them with a kind of awe, as if they were negotiable in payment of just debts.

And when I began to throw out hay to the sheep he said, "Stop that!"

"Why?"

"You can't say you've been of any use to me, because you haven't," he grumbled. "You're only in the way."

That was his lay, then—no obligations.

"You've gone halfway across this state now," he said, miserably. He walked back and forth, all bowed over.

Where was it he accused me of stealing the egg? Let's see the diary. Riverton, I think—yes. That poultry car was right behind us, you know; and the man tending it must have played pitch in the caboose most of the time. Pitch and profanity and God-defying yarns, that's all there was there, Sydney said, and he was going to keep his skirts clear of it.

It was hot there at Riverton. Hot metal was coming to have a charm for me, too. The cars

were fairly tinkling on the rails. Suddenly I heard a hen cackle.

I went back at the double quick and glared into that poultry car. Myriad wilted combs, fluttering throats, glazed eyes, parted yellow bills. They were stuffed into zinc compartments. By George! Talk about the Black Hole of Calcutta! And this car had been patented four times, too.

I looked in through those scaly yellow feet, and all the while those mournful thousands were cluttering, "*Morituri te salutamus.*"

I couldn't relieve their situation, it's a pipe; but I certainly was desperate for a change of diet from Bologna and ginger snaps. I stirred those hens up with a lath and stared under them, and, sure enough, I sighted an egg; but it was situated toward the middle of the car. The lath fell short of that entrancing oval by a full two inches. Gad! What a vision of succulent frail loveliness! It began to look like a mirage, too, but a black hen there had the common humanity to claw it and send it spinning my way. I jacked up the metal screen with a bolt of iron I had picked up alongside the track, and the egg rolled into my hand—a strictly fresh egg. I got three before the train started.

Sydney, of course, accused me of theft.

"Theft?" I said. "What's theft? There's murder going on in the car back of us."

"Murder?" he shouted.

"Yes, of hens."

"Oh, hens," he said, more calmly.

And I answered, "Oh, eggs," and began to tour around in the sheep. You can't imagine the

gravity portrayed in all those absurd, resigned, bearded faces crowding up to us like mystified patriarchs huddling together after they had given up trying to piece the ends of destiny together. It was farcical. I felt as if I were traveling in a Noah's ark.

Sydney was silent a long time, and I knew that he was working himself up to the point of asking me to get off again. He watered the sheep with a small pail instead of accepting my aid with the washtub, and when finally he wheeled on me it was to ask me right out where I was going.

I said, dramatically, "I am going into the Canyon of the Fools after May Gowdy, since you must know."

"May Gowdy!" he gasped. "You don't mean to tell me that she's actually gone out there!"

I did mean to tell him that. He sank down and put his head in his hands.

"I'm afraid there won't any good come of that," he groaned.

"So I say," I countered; "and that ought to explain my presence here."

"What is she to you?" he inquired, sulkily.

"I might say she's just a woman in trouble, but she's more than that. She's the bright particular star in my firmament."

Syd faltered out that I was nothing but a tramp, and how I could have the gall to aspire—

"Somebody must if she isn't to fall into Jim Harper's hands," I suggested.

I saw my chance then. I told him frankly that I was a tramp, even as he had surmised, and I

asked him to guess what had brought me into that condition of degradation. Without waiting for him to hazard anything, I plunged on and confessed that not so very many moons ago I had been much like other young men, putting my nose to the grindstone every morning and ragging around nights; and then a girl had thrown me over, and after that I had started traveling as a means of easing the agony of rejection, and gone from bad to worse, until now I was an outcast and in a frame of mind to stop at nothing short of murder.

"A man can get to be an outcast overnight," I said, mournfully, "but it isn't so easy to climb back into the fold again."

I went on to say that this sort of road taint adheres and agglutinates, and Sydney's face got as white as chalk, and his eyes were awfully big and lambent. And do you know, just as I had hoped, he couldn't resist touching on his romance with May, as I knew well enough he couldn't, mad with pique and homesickness as he was. Yes, he *was* mad, too. With this sense he had of weak connivance in a moral outrage, mind you, he wanted to choke me. He would have seen me ground under the wheels of that disgusting, clanking, odorous sheep chariot of his, and yet he felt compelled to tell me the story of that unfortunate affair of his. He fairly lost sight of the outrage of my being there in this forcible remembrance of his loss, and he painted that shipwreck of his hopes in dark colors. He told me where he had first seen May Gowdy, what his sensations were,

and mentioned some snappy little thing she had said that had set him thinking.

"I will say one thing," he admitted, in that sorrowful voice. "I found out later that, with all her good qualities, she isn't one of these women who keep their lips sacred for the man they are to marry."

"I don't want to appear cynical, old man," I thrust in, "but haven't all those women taken the veil?"

He couldn't say.

"She's perfectly omnivorous," he whispered. Heartless, too, and how so beautiful a creature could be so utterly devoid of the finer feelings was what Syd wouldn't undertake to say. Meet a man and encircle him one day, and fend him off the next with a light laugh and a bit of pleasantry, leaving him dangling with that hideous fear of what had happened in between.

"It just seems to be a question of how much powder a man will burn for her," he admitted at length.

"Powder?" I yelled. "What do you mean—powder?"

"I mean what I say," Syd came back, sulkily. "When she wasn't at a dance she had to be at a shooting gallery. Why, look here! To show how she is, she offered one night to strike out with me and marry me, with a rifle in the hollow of her arm, and take our honeymoon in the woods with just money enough in our pockets to prevent our being taken up as vagrants. Twenty-three cents, isn't it? Live off the country and sleep in

barns and haystacks, anywhere and everywhere, and milk cows when we were thirsty."

"What broke that plot up?" I whispered.

"What broke it up? I broke it up," Syd said. "Do you think I would be mad enough to take a woman on those terms?"

"No, you probably wouldn't," I agreed.

Man, it brought tears to my eyes to think of the opportunities that man had probably let slip through his fingers in one short lifetime! Think to what lengths he and a girl like May wouldn't have gone in the circumstances as outlined! What's over Niagara in a barrel?

Do you wonder she switched to Harper? Syd told me about that, too. It seems he had taken her to ride in a borrowed horseless carriage that broke down right outside a country church, and May stepped into the church just to be out of harm's way while Syd was spread-eagled beneath the axles. A game of copenhagen was going on in the vestry. You're probably acquainted with it. You stand round in a circle with your hands on a piece of rope, a sort of grommet, and the captive in the middle, blindfolded, tries to grab one of the hands. It's a rule of the game that you can't actually take your hands off the rope, of course. You merely shift them up and down, and there's a forfeit.

You can't imagine May's not sitting into a game like that, I suppose, with her temperament. Syd came in just as she was having the forfeit exacted, as luck would have it, and the man in the center of the ring was Jim Harper. The fact that Sydney

happened to know Jim Harper very well didn't mend matters in the least. What he had to think about was May's reaction to the whole degrading business.

"It took her by surprise, of course," Syd said, "but still she was as composed as could be afterward. She told me it was no use crying over spilled milk, and why make a scene and appear odd by refusing to pay the forfeit? She always was too plausible," Syd roared at the end.

And do you know, I had pushed that inquest, that post-mortem, just far enough to suffer a kind of interior twinge myself. It did take the tuck out of me and no mistake, but I reflected that it was past and gone. Syd said the tide had turned that day, slacked and ebbed. May began to be seen with Harper everywhere, and she had been just mad enough to egg him on into this Western adventure, with the idea of joining him when he got his feet placed.

"He's let in for it now," Syd said, bitterly, "and I hope he likes his bargain."

I listened hard. I heard Syd's words, and I heard, too, the clack and roar under me, like a kind of iron oratory proclaiming the annihilation of weary space, and I wondered how it was with that starry little pacemaker of mine, May Gowdy. I felt almost brotherly enough to tell Syd what it felt like, being kissed by May, in case that wonderful woman hadn't been careless enough to pay him a like forfeit. It may seem ludicrous, and it is ludicrous, but I felt even then that, barring accidents and such slip-ups as that one in the

vestry, I was the only man in the world that had been so consecrated. I wondered hopefully if she hadn't seen fit to be a little standoffish even with Jim, a wee bit ulterior, in short, and I decided in the affirmative. I pictured a state of things where Jim had been practically forced into exile with the promise of a kiss for full success, and I decided that he hadn't got it yet, although it might be flying toward him on the Western Flyer.

Syd and I turned in and slept together like twins that night. But he woke up the next morning in a blacker fit than ever, and watered the sheep with the small pail again. He felt condemned to think he had unbosomed himself of that precious store of heart's misery to a renegade of my stamp, a man without finer feelings, a man capable of ejecting forcibly an egg from a patented poultry car.

This was the third day of our partnership, I think, and as I was eating ginger snaps out of his pail I could see slow defiance gathering in him from some subterranean source, as you have seen pools fill up at high tide on a salt marsh; the slow, righteous stuff that nothing can check, backed by every moral reasoning. He was rendering himself impervious to the assaults of logic, and he said, in a low, fierce tone, "Now, then, you've got to get off at this tank."

Well, sir, we went past that tank and I didn't get off. I could see a seven-thousand-foot elevation right ahead, and I told Syd I hadn't come provided with an alpenstock.

I will say this for him: he never threatened

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violence. He was the dove of peace to his last tail feather, and to the bitter end he clung to moral suasion. His position by now was thoroughly false, that's certain. Looking out through a hole in the hay, I saw him act the part of a disgruntled conspirator. He held converse with brakies in a guilty undertone. I expected momentarily to hear him shriek out, "Your man is up there in the hay."

But he refrained. He must have decided that he could never shake me off. It was a case of black care and the horseman, and do you know what he resorted to then? Silence! He wasn't speaking to me. Do you suppose he was going to hobnob with crime? He acted as if he had said good-by to me in spite of myself—farewell.

I knew about this. I knew that this was how you turn a man down in the sort of community he had lived in before he came to town. You meet a man one day and shake him by the hand, and the next you sidle past him like his old shock-headed gliding ghost. You say nothing, and you indicate that spoken contempt would be thrown away on him. It takes years and years to patch up these things; and people take pride—yes, sir, they take honest pride—in the number of years that they have put between them and the voice of a former friend. Can you imagine it? Well, I affirm to you that it is so.

And this was the sort of cloud I was under now. He moped in the sheep, shoving out tufts of hay to them and playing with the wool. I could see no chance of winning him over, and no

advantage in winning him over, either, this side of the Jordan.

We had been climbing imperceptibly for some time, and now we pitched headlong into a valley and the trucks hummed under us. The sun was going down. Jove! it was a kind of curtain magic, a deep glow offset by color in the sky, with flaky crimson clouds floating over and the jagged crown of a great mountain tumbling up! The sun came floating down like a golden bubble which a breath of air would sway and cause to vanish in a wreath of fire. It lit on top of that mountain, flattened its lower limb, and rolled down out of sight.

I took my breath down deep. There I was, thundering down the clay banks and rubble and stony gorges of the Rockies, blinking my eyes and actually mistrusting that all that wild territory was a dream. I caught sight of tiny trees deep down, blurred by the rush of air, and splashes of green, too—great shadowy acreages. It was a sheep country, and if you ever want to bag anything beautiful get a shot at that.

I forgot myself, forgot Syd, drifted away in the smoke. I wasn't even afraid of the terrifying night cold that we were about to inherit on the death of day in those mountains. I was afraid of nothing. I simply stopped eating ginger snaps and craned my fool neck around that gate. I was happy, and I should have laughed at the offer of a standard Pullman.

I broke all bounds, and yelled at Syd, "Come alive and catch some of this!"

He was in the middle of the rams, fingering

their beards and brushing cinders off their backs. It's hard to walk through sheep naturally. You have to straddle them, sliding your leg over two or three fat backs in a row. He made just one grudging step and then stooped and blinked through the slats.

We were tearing downgrade again, boring into that dusky valley like a weasel into dirt. And that mountain swelled up and looked huge and bloated, with a gloomy kind of gory light at the top like a play of internal fires. What tonnage hanging up there! I watched the red fading from those rock faces, and a purple or plum color flowing in.

And then we were shooting up again on the heels of momentum. Those hot engines ahead began to clash and cough and sputter. The train slacked and quarreled with the couplings, and all the rams jumped one way again and stood still, with that exasperating resignation on their bearded faces. I felt myself coming up out of the lower world, the light flooded back—fast—pouring over the mountain in red waves.

We barely crept along. We came on as sluggish as a caterpillar on a back fence. And then we topped it, we made the grade, we trundled through a narrow canyon, and there the sun was again, dead ahead, at arm's length, gorgeous, gorgeous, and sinking down exactly as before.

This second setting picked me right up, and I yelled like a fiend thrown up out of trouble for a minute. I got a lot of cheer out of that. We fell down into that second valley. We seemed to

let go all holds, too. I left my stomach hanging on the breeze, and I had a feeling that every last little thing that could possibly revolve had been slicked in grease. We roared down into a tunnel, choked, and coughed. I got my arms around a ram's belly and shoved my nose deep into the wool, and after an eternity we shot out again; shot out like a greasy bullet out of a dirty smoothbore, into the light again, with the clean air rushing past in a blue stream; and there, rolling ahead of us in smooth billows, was a great yellow plain, and thousands and thousands of miles away this time was the sun, still sinking!

I laughed at these three sunsets like a madman. It was a race! It was a feat like Joshua's, stopping the sun, but this time on the very edge of the world. With the sound of those released engines roaring in my ears, I felt that all this was symbolic and that the sun would never set on my fortunes now. I leaned on the gate, and I fancied May somewhere over there just ahead of me, encouraging me with those comprehending eyes—how is it Sir Philip Sidney calls them?—those long-with-love-acquainted eyes?—daring me to come on; to come on in my rags and my dirt, with my starvation eyes and my heart on fire with queer notions of derring do. What a howling little genius I was then! And why not? Isn't it, after all, a stroke of genius to seize the immense opportunity there is in youth, to fire the heart and loose the imagination by touching the spring of doubtful adventures?

I don't mean to bracket myself with Syd Hecker,

of course. He was clay that the potter had al
but refused. He had been born only to torment
himself. He should have pitched me off a thousand
miles rearward, and he hadn't done it.

What do you suppose he was doing at the time
of those sunsets? He was fixing up his cash ac
count. He had bought a fistful of crackers at
the last stop, and he was just remembering to
set that item down with a stub of pencil.

As a matter of fact, it was the chicken king
who cooked my goose in the end. He and Sydney
got into consultation in the shade of the poultry
car while we were standing on the tracks at Long
Legged River Junction, and Sydney had the inspir
ation to invite him into the sheep car while I was
away foraging again for eggs. This chicken king
was a cadaverous man with huge, luscious freckles
full of color. He was well pigmented, and he
looked as if he had been leading a wild life in the
caboose. He moved like a wraith, too, but I
knew in a moment that I should have to do what
that man told me, just as much as if I had had
second sight. Isn't that curious?

The two of them talked together like a couple
of solid bankers, with side glances at me full o
quiet contempt. You would have thought they
were exchanging confidences about the state o
the gold market. By Jove! there was something
crisp and imperative in their utterances!

I saw that chicken king's head swing toward me
as I came alongside, and just then the train
started, and I got a grip of the gate and brough
my eyes to a level with his. They were perfectly

expressionless. He said to Syd, "Only sixteen died last night," and before the words were well out of his mouth he reached over absentmindedly and brushed me off the outside of that moving train as if I were a dead fly.

Not one word was interchanged. I doubt if he so much as told Syd when I parted company with them. Syd had got in among the sheep when he saw me coming, and turned his back on me. After sharing with me, too, for all those weary miles!

And there you have the difference between force and argument. It's barely possible this world isn't ruled exclusively by love and reason, after all—don't you think so? That chicken king accomplished in three linear feet, with the flat of his hand and in the midst of conversation on another topic, what Syd had failed to accomplish in a thousand miles, with all the flock of arguments he had at his command, too—my elimination, namely.

CHAPTER V

THERE'S no doubt I was eliminated. I was awfully surprised, and more than a little jarred, too, to find myself sprouting there in the cinders, and the caboose tailing away down the track. No bones were broken, however—I must have been too young for that—and as soon as I had a chance to look the situation over there at Long-Legged River I took heart. It was a relief, for one thing, not to have Sydney mooning in my face all the time.

By late afternoon I had hooked up with another tadpole very much in my class—a study in migratory adolescence. We went the round of a couple of agencies together, and at one of them a chance to ship was offered us for a dollar apiece. On consultation we were willing to embrace it. True, I had not the dollar; but my tadpole was either generous or lonesome, and he had it for me. He had other money, also.

We were taken on as section hands, I think. It doesn't really matter. By this time I had come to look upon these mysterious shipments as not even conditioned on toil. I applied at the agencies with detached calm, and showed as much aggressiveness as if I had been doing business with a regulation ticket office.

While the agent was filling out our blanks a thought occurred to him. He halted his pen in midair and said, "I suppose you boys know it's pretty tough down there."

Yes, certainly we did. We stood watching him, grave and subdued, with candid, work-willing eyes. Faces of honest resolve turned toward that distant section, that streak of dust in the desert. We gave that man to understand that we were aching to throw our lives away in the service of the railroad, and we evinced a strange loyalty to the wraith of work beckoning across those yellow reaches.

But he had a damaging interrogation in reserve for us. He wanted to know what baggage we had. We told him eagerly that we had none, thinking it would please him to learn that we traveled light. On the contrary, he informed us that some form of baggage was imperative.

"Blankets, for example. Blankets will do for baggage," he suggested, hopefully.

"We have no blankets."

"Can't ship you without blankets," the agent said, and he slipped the pen back of his ear, and back we went flop into the great undifferentiated as far as he was concerned. His orders were strict.

Do you know, in some strange way a blanket out there had become the symbol of a man's honesty and of his respectability. If he had a blanket he was a man of property and a salable citizen capable of making a contract in his own behalf; but if he had no blanket he was a man without a country; he was a tramp, a pariah.

You can't very well complain of the tyranny of social usages, can you, when lines are drawn as fine as that in the desert? What do you suppose was at the bottom of that requirement of a blanket? Something to draw over your bones after you had given up the ghost over there against the sky line?

On investigation we found that "blanket" was a broad term—a genus, in short, of which one of the species was "quilt." Two quilts were equivalent to one blanket, just as three mink skins were used to match one beaver in the fur country.

I advised my tadpole to buy himself a blanket, but he nobly refused to leave me out in the cold. He had money for only one blanket. I joshed him and got him by degrees into a junk shop where we bought an immense quilt, one of these New England sunshine-and-shadow affairs. The dealer at first refused to bring it out. He said it was dirty.

But I said, "Well, just how dirty?" and he showed us.

He knew the shape his goods were in, but in spite of everything we bought the quilt. Can you imagine it? Seeking transportation under the ægis of a quilt!

You may be interested in the idea that had visited me. I had suddenly remembered having passed an alley leading to the stage entrance of the opera house, where a concrete wall was being laid. As we were going by the men were knocking off, and I saw eight or ten huge cement sacks lying about empty.

These sacks were really the nubbin of my idea. We repaired to that alley, filched seven or eight of the sacks, and rolled them in our quilt. We found odds and ends of muddy rope and tied these sacks in with many curious and finger-nail-defying knots. We even cut holes in the quilt and rove the ropes through and through. We fairly wove that bundle together until it seemed to us that Job himself would tire and quit before he could get down to the mystery of those sacks.

When all was ready we broke the brush off an old broom and, thrusting the handle through the top of our mass of quilt and sacks, we staggered off toward the agency like men carrying treasure. Wasn't that a blithe intrigue? Think of men having the temerity to assail the great American desert with a quilt!

Nevertheless, it was by means of this bundle that we convinced the agent that we were men of substance—our tangible properties rolled into one. He issued tickets to us, and orders to report at the station at midnight.

As it got toward midnight my tadpole began to lose his nerve a trifle. Did you ever execute in the dark what you had planned by day? There is something about night that unhinges resolution, don't you think so? The blood stream slackens then, I'm told. Something uncertain and chimerical lurks in the shadows. There's something flintlike and voracious in strange faces seen in a gas flare; something hideous in the shifting countenance of chance, too, when you come to think of it.

It certainly was lonesome. You know, when you are traveling like that, and have to watch each face for some sign of kindliness or some sign of weakness, and when settled communities breathe on you the breath of an iceberg, it isn't to be wondered at altogether if you get that sensation of being junked—scrap metal. There's nothing shameful in being forced to concede that at such times the wine of romance ebbs fast out of your blood.

There wasn't a scintilla in mine when I saw that agent emerging at a late hour from the rear door of the work train. He had a blazing face, bulging arms. He was a heavy breather, too, and drops of coffee were sparkling on his mustache. He was harsh, harsh. He looked through us, ripped us apart, and laid bare that lie ticking in our pulses.

"That your baggage?" he roared, shoving back his hat.

"Yes, sir. That's both of us."

We had thrown that scandalous quilt into an immense pile of quilts and blankets.

"Both of you, hey? Well, now, let's see. Let's look into this."

He began to untie the knots.

"Pretty careful how you tie up, ain't you, hey? Now we'll see. I've sent too many hobos down the line already. What I want is section hands."

Section hands! Men with quilts! Wasn't that quaint?

We stood at gaze, perspiring and watching him perspire over those knots and whisper death into

his mustache. Suddenly he roared out like a man in torture and reached into his pocket for his knife. He was going to cut the Gordian knot! He was going to send only men with two quilts apiece into that desert or perish miserably in the attempt. Yes, by George! it was a point of honor with him to guarantee that streak of rust, that cactus-ridden platform or water tank, whatever it was, nothing but men with two quilts apiece—good moral men, in short!

That human comedy was too much for us, and we swiveled round and ran for it. We stumbled through the dark, broken-hearted, into the West, toward that remote promise of intellectual day.

What do you suppose motivated the precious pair of us? Why had we left home and what did we expect to find here? Not work, that's certain. For my part, I had an ambition, outside of my pursuit of May, yet how to formulate it I didn't know. I can't formulate it now with any skill. I suppose, though, that nothing would have gratified me like getting to the top of the heap without any of the usual grinding preliminaries. That's the sum and substance of it. Can you merge with me in stuff like that?

I could fairly vision myself side-stepping all this fuddy-duddying that young men nowadays have forced on them by obtuse elders; seeing a hole wide enough to drive a cart through and plugging it like an enterprising back-field artist. Drive through, and out into the pure serene, away from the grind of canvas, nothing but the goal standing up ahead of me and insensate yells

on every hand. Yes, I am willing now to concede that I had laid my plans to take advantage of some surprising shift in the economy of things which would let youthful audacity take the place of trained skill and plodding intelligence.

I wanted to be rich and famous, I grant you that; but rich through some unusual stroke of policy, famous in an eyewink—like the famous Mr. Byron, wake up one morning and find myself famous—and thirsty; thronging memories and hot coppers; a made man, and not handmade, either, after one of these dusty uphill pulls which leave a man minus hair and enthusiasm, but after one wild night, in the first blush, in the hot pulse of youth; the world at my feet by reason of something I had done the night before on impulse.

I had always felt, from a child, in my bones, that large capacity for accepting everything that fame and money implied—leisure, for example—and along with that went a craving for knowledge. Knowledge was power; knowledge was silk pajamas and four-bit cigars; it was rising at ten and knocking off at three. I craved it—what young man doesn't?—but I wanted it tilted into my head through the spout of some education oil can, while I slept, after putting in a whale of an evening somewhere in some brilliant gathering.

Queer, isn't it, that the secret spring of ambition—that thing which drives men to work themselves into early graves or dishonorable alliances, as like as not—should be this cankerous desire to take it easy later on? And that's only one of many mocking ironies.

My tadpole and I had lost our quilt, lost our shipment out, lost our nerve; lost everything, I take it, except our capacity for going hard. Every second I thought I was going to stumble over some of those short targets that control the switch frogs, but I had thrown caution to the winds. Speed was life. I don't suppose I would have pulled up before daybreak if I hadn't felt the rails quiver and, looking back, affrighted, seen a great clanking mogul with a rudimentary stack glaring down upon us and coming to a grinding stop on its papier-maché wheels.

The Western Flyer—and five hours overdue. One glimpse of that magic train of cars and my resolution was formed. I got my hand on the tadpole's shoulder and yelled, "Look here, I'm going back!"

I think that was the last I saw of him. He couldn't have viewed going back with my hopefulness, that's certain. Poor little devil, I've sometimes wondered how it fared with him.

As a matter of fact, I don't suppose that agent had taken three steps in pursuit. He was satisfied with having showed us up. When I got back into the light again I looked for him, but he was gone. I could see those blanket men sorting out their blankets. And do you know they actually looked humble and respectable to a man standing there in outer darkness? They looked righteous and provided for, somehow—yes, they looked as if they had made a middling success of life, prospered, become owners of quilts. Does it seem absurd to you for me to say that I actually had

a lump in my throat from lacking a quilt? In my eyes, then, it had the dignity of a sheepskin diploma or a birth certificate.

Well, life is only a confusion of symbols, isn't it? Things hung out to signify something else. A man must have some sort of badge or decoration, you know; something that classifies him as one of a group; something that evidences moral quality. Not a doubt of that, I suppose.

Weakness had made me desperate by this time. I was weak, partly from that recent fright, partly from lack of food, and I felt as if one way and another I had lost out a good deal of sawdust. I was gathering my forces to go back and brace that agent, confess my iniquity, and beg to be let off one quilt, when I smelled coffee in the air.

I was right off the lunch room. The odors commingling and fraternizing there as they came gushing out that window made a wide hole in my reserves of sang-froid—I know that. My nose twitched like a rabbit's. I stopped dead, glared through that window at the radiance of a steaming coffee urn and then at the back of the young woman perched on that stool to the right with a cup of that ravishing brew half raised to her lips.

There was something appealing—more, there was something strangely familiar—in the shoulder slant, in all the implications of that girl, and I raised my eyes to her hat.

You've guessed now, surely. It was the hat with the heckle feathers—and May Gowdy under it.

I said, "May!" in a delighted whisper that

bably sounded hoarse as a raven's croak from re she sat. She was round in a flash.

Bobolink!" she faltered.

"Let me see you outside," I said, rapidly, "when u have finished that sandwich."

She came out with it in her hand, as a matter f fact.

"You?" she cried, happily, wringing my hand. "Of all men! Where did you drop from?"

"Out of the everywhere into the here," I said, with a graceful gesture.

Imagine the pride in my bones. I blessed every chance of the road, Syd Hecker and his friend included, that had enabled me to materialize here exactly in this way. And May, between laughing and wondering, begged me to give a rational account of myself and not be such a tease.

"You look awfully draggled," she said.

"So would you," I said, "if you had been living out of Sydney Hecker's pail of ginger snaps."

"Sydney!" she breathed. "So you've actually—"

"Oh, Sydney," I said, "was one too many for me. He's a wild lad when away from home. But it brings a lump into my throat to talk about Syd. Let's talk about yourself. How are you making it?"

"I'm just dead from homesickness," she said, tightening her grip of my hand. "Worse every mile, too. I never felt like this before. I feel—you know—gaspy."

I did know.

"I've just wired Jim to meet me," she said,

with a pale smile. "I got to thinking what a fix if he shouldn't be there when I arrived, and I gave up that idea of walking in on him. Look here, Bob! I wish you'd come with me as far as Haggett Junction and get me started right."

Pale sorrow must have looked out of my eyes then, and she saw it and went on, glibly: "It's worth it to me—honest. Wait! I'll get the ticket."

"Never!" I said. "Never in this world! Not with your money!"

"Bobolink, you boob," May said, staggered, "you wouldn't actually refuse!"

"Wouldn't I? I do refuse!" I cried. "Look here, little girl! I don't want to antagonize you, but your train is starting right away."

The maddening fact was that there wasn't a moment left us.

"Do come!" she pleaded, and a sudden notion pierced my skull.

"I will come," I said. "I promise! Count on me!"

"This way, then. Here, hold this for me," and she just thrust that sandwich into my hand and jumped up the steps of that big vestibule car two at a time.

I held back, and the door closed and the inside platform was flapped back and stamped on. I stood there staring at that sandwich, and I felt as if it was consecrated. She had taken a bite out of it. I stared first at that and then at that long line of lighted windows, thinking I might catch a glimpse of her, perhaps my last glimpse.

I was in the old heroic mood, the mood of faith, the mood for miracles and undiluted moonshine. And suddenly I understood that she had left that sandwich with me for good and all. It wasn't simply to be held in escrow. She had mistrusted that I wouldn't come inside. She meant for me to eat it.

I put my teeth into it like a wolf, and the tears were coming into my eyes fast. She had saved me again. I began to think of her in the light of a guardian angel, and I cogitated a thousand ways of paying her back in her own exalted coin. There might be a train wreck, and then I could be instrumental in holding the coach away from that dear body by bearing its weight on my own back, and then being half crushed beneath it after they had got her safely out—and she could nurse me back to life, and mayhap kiss me while I was unconscious.

These were mere feverish by-products of my central idea, the idea I had had in the instant of promising to come with her to Haggett Junction. I meant to ride the top. You see what a loadstone that girl must have been. I had all the love of a whole skin that the normal male animal comes into this world with, and yet I was going to ride the top.

I looked up at those tops yearningly. They had come through a shower of rain and they glittered and looked bad, looked cold and slippery and snakish and aërial. Could anything have been more fantastic than that mad resolution I made to haul myself up there after the train began to move?

I tell you it takes art and science in one embrace

to make the roof of a moving train. It's very unlike hopping freights, I assure you. It calls for training and schooling, like any other imaginative calling. A novice has no business meddling with it.

I started running down the track in the shadow of a string of empties, and it was as plain as a pikestaff that there were a lot more traveling men who were just as sick of Long-Legged River as I was myself. Every block of shadow out there was jammed full of prowling figures. I heard a whisper or two, gruntings, and I caught a wild flash of eyes, and was aware of a huge concentration of attention on the length and breadth of that train.

What was going to happen? There seemed to be power enough in those mysterious shadows to overthrow it by assault. All seeking outside berths, too. I was desperate, right. If I had once stopped to ask myself what likelihood of success I had in competition for place against those expert battalions lurking there I might have been lost. But I didn't stop. I was a man in love, a romantic, and I ran like mad; and suddenly I heard the engine cough, and a play of bellows was set up between vestibules.

And then in a twinkling that concealed army of overlooked travelers flooded across the tracks in a mad charge. They came up like ants out of sand, they swarmed like locusts. I saw confused intertwinings of legs and arms, grotesque bodies going through the air as if that train had been a strong magnet in its operation on human flesh.

Square in my path was a man in a conical

straw hat. Lunging forward left and right, he checked me. He was drunk, and he had the drunk's inspired faculty of blocking the road of sober people. I put the flat of my hand between that man's shoulder blades and pushed—and he was gone, evaporated, shredded out of my young life like a toy balloon. I haven't the fainest idea what actually became of him. I didn't look behind—hadn't time. I simply looked up and jumped, catching at anything and everything; lunged into space like a man in love with stars.

I made a noise coming against the side of that train about like a June bug lighting on a screen, I imagine. I felt like that. I had got hold of two cars by the window frames of their vestibules by great good luck, for that is literally the only place where the ascent is possible, and then I had caught some kind of projection from that steel underbody with my toes.

I sprawled there for a few seconds, breasting the bellows, and the train began to sway and produce those clippering sounds that testify to speed, by George! I got my fingers into the steel frame of the vestibule and drew up my lank body inch by inch, catching my toes on what I could. It was riotous. If it hadn't been for the added ounce or two of strength that sandwich of May's had generated in me I should have dropped off, I'm certain. Those vestibule bellows were puffing and sighing like an accordion, and now and again the two coaches butted together with a bad sound like mangled tin.

I couldn't lean out the least fraction of an inch,

either; but to cling close was to run a risk of being pinched to death. By dint of close inboard work I got my head level with the top of the coach, and by shifting my weight carefully I got one palm after the other up there, hollowed, so as to produce a kind of suction on that wet surface of sloping steel. And then I shut my eyes and muscled myself up there by tilting up my elbows. You could practice that in a gymnasium for years and years and never suspect the exhilaration there might be in it under right conditions.

Just as I thought I had made it at last, and was straining toward the center line with a feeling of triumph, my head came smack up against a hard cloth-covered object. You have three guesses. No? Well, it was the head of the hobo who had been coming up on the other side all this time.

Can you imagine it? We leaned together and shoved opposite ways, and every fiber in me was yearning to slide that exasperating and tenacious skull back down the way it had come. It was fierce. My body had absolutely no mercy and no sympathy with the predicament of the other fellow at all, and my brain had fled. I was nothing but a bug imperfectly adapted to the roof of a passenger coach.

Well, we both survived. Providence had taken care to equip the pair of us with round heads, and they slid past each other ultimately. We locked shoulders, we seized on each other and sighed and shuddered like long-separated lovers who embrace without daring to look at each other in the first rush of gladness. Our position was too equivocal

for speech, as far as that goes, and when we released each other we crawled opposite ways.

I remember squirming over rows of bodies, and presently of opening my coat, in imitation of what I saw going on all round me, and buttoning it around a steam pipe so that in case I fell asleep I shouldn't roll off. That train top was nothing but a litter of heads and heels.

How in the world had they all got up there? Mystery! I can only ask you to bear in mind that they were experts, picked men. They furnished no answer to the question. They were silent in unknown tongues, lolling there exhausted by the Herculean ascent. Do you begin to see the nature of outside transportation? You hear it talked of as a facility—transportation facility. I failed to see the appropriateness of that term. I achieved it because I was an exceptional man. So were we all—all exceptional men—and with one exception we were all landed in the borax mills. Let me tell you how that was.

At a certain point in the desert beyond Long-Legged River stands an arc light which hangs higher than the roof of the train. If the train stops under that light it is the instinct of those who hold outside berths to roll off the roof forthwith, like water off a duck's back. And, lo! they drop into the midst of a sheriff and a bunch of deputies, all heads of families, and all business men, too. At the same time all the available train crew joins in the chase.

Do you begin to discern dimly now the reason for the absence of all opposition at Long-Legged

River? These men who are bagged there by t
arc light are formed in squads and marched a
to the borax mills. The court sentences them
vagrancy, and they toil there for months on
with King Alkali sitting on their lungs—in
middle of a desert from which escape is hard,
Because, don't you see, as soon as you have wo
out your sentence there's nothing to do but to
to move on. You are recaptured, sentenced on
same charge, and after a while numbered am
the incorrigibles.

Charming prospect, wasn't it? Wouldn't
suppose that borax would form a powerful anti
to the nomadic poison? Well, I escaped th
mills, I believe, only by having buttoned my
too securely to that steam pipe. While I
wrestling madly with my coat I heard a nois
falling bodies, and immediately after sound
yelling and herding up; cries of "Stand still?"
"Halt!"

I simply wilted down on that roof again. W
was the good of planking myself down into
midst of a bunch of sheriffs? What I did succ
in doing was this: I rolled off that ridge
jammed my body up against that line of vent
tors and lay there as snug as a sandbag alon
window sash. The train was a good many hc
late, and it was unlikely there would be a deta
search of that top.

I heard a faint voice cry, "A-a-ll right!"

You see? Somebody away in the rear
simply sighted down that line of tops and seen t
they were bare. The train began to go ahead, v

a sound like incidental music. Gad! I felt buoyant! I went back to my steam pipe and lay there and sent wild yells ringing up. The only survivor! The one man left out of that collection of experts! Can you imagine how I felt? There they were, marching away to manufacture borax, however it's done; and here was I, lying high, swaying along, with May Gowdy maybe in an upper berth not three feet under me. I lay there grappling with the metal of that train top, and it was nearly the same thing as if I had taken May to my heart.

Little would she dream what had taken place out there. What woman in her senses would credit a man with that mad folly? But there I was. I had made good my promise, and I lay there examining my ego and thinking of the many ways I meant to make it up to May for parting with that ham sandwich in my hour of need. And all the while, with a gusty roaring, the Western Flyer went dipping into unseen valleys brimming with spicy warm air, and anon, without warning, went charging up into another range among a lot of cruel cold peaks, and I would find myself shivering against that steam pipe with one warm streak along my chest and belly and my right leg. A charge into the unknown and a serene challenging of destiny. I say it in all seriousness—I have never had a more romantic mount than that same iron horse.

And I can state frankly that calm recognition on my part of my own greatness wasn't lacking. My mind was haunted by rich images, and it was my cherished conviction that Fortune herself must have been riding the wind that fled over those tops.

I heard the clashing of her musky wings, and began to think all this portended good luck for r in the Canyon of the Fools. May and Jim wou come to want, most likely, and make it possible f me to play the part of a mysterious benefact whose name didn't appear in the transaction. A then Jim would take sick and refuse all nouris ment and die!

Once I saw a shaft of light a long way to my le and a string of dim windows, like a queer serpe with splotchy scales of tarnished gold, windi through the sand, with a long stream of yellow f fanning back from its head. It howled by like pleasant delirium. I felt its hot breath, and f asleep still buttoned to that steam pipe.

CHAPTER VI

AT dawn we slowed into Haggett Junction, and I rolled off the top and hit the dirt with an uncomfortable jar that reminded me disagreeably of my own hollowness. I was hungrier than ever. I picked myself up and stared about me. It was beautiful level country, garnished with a huge pink mountain that jutted up like something on a platter. All the analogies that occurred to me on the spot had to do with food.

I took time to reflect that there wasn't a soul here except May Gowdy who knew that they made wooden minnows back in Dowagiac, and even what she knew was hearsay. And for another thing, there wasn't a soul here who knew what it was like to ride the top of the Western Flyer, and they had seen it fuming down from the mountains all their lives, too. This singular achievement was mine and I felt consecrated to a life of hardship and unsung heroism.

I couldn't help smiling, and involuntarily I applied that smile to a hairy man who stood over a gang of men who were digging a hole out back of the station. A ring of wondering people had gathered around this threatening crater of industry. I felt as if the spirit of work or some dire plague of energy had broken out just there and they were trying to hem it in.

"What's all this?" I said to the hairy man, in crisp accents.

He gave me a bitter scrutiny and came back at me with, "What are you doing here?"

I kept on smiling. I may not have been accoutered like a citizen. I very likely looked out at elbow, physically and spiritually, but that fleeting meeting with May Gowdy had endowed me with a beautiful shining armor, and I thought I was a young god and impregnable to attack by mere whiskered mortals.

I recall saying in level tones, "Well, I am a tourist, more or less."

He took his pipe out of his mouth and pointed the stem at the muddy backs of those men.

"Those hombrays came in here as tourists, too," he said, shortly.

I sheered off, and right away I felt that some kind of pestiferous shadow was dogging me and running up my back, just as you will see a cloud shadow run over a smiling meadow. A horse-faced gentleman got in consultation with the hairy man, and swung off short, came about, and took me just above the elbow in a smart nip.

"Where are you going, old-timer?" he said.

"Los Angeles."

"What are you going to do there?"

"What business is that of yours?"

He laid back his coat, and there on his suspender was a bright star glimmering. Wasn't that stultifying? This was a panic year, you understand. The panic was then coming on, and the chamber of commerce of a certain large town had appropriated

money to small towns outlying for the purpose of arresting hobos and putting them on the road—economy measure. In a flash, too, I saw the reason for the appalling beauty of that landscape. Those poor devils had probably put in spare time carrying that mountain and giving it that slick pink look. It was gruesome!

"What is your trade?" he said.

"Carpenter's apprentice," I threw out, scornfully.

My imagination was always a quick asset with me, and this was a good stroke, too. Don't you think so? I had even provided against possible discovery on his part that I didn't know the use of tools. I was only an apprentice.

His eye wandered at this intelligence, but he got hold of himself right away, and said, sternly, with a glint of triumph in his eye, "If you are an apprentice, where are your tools?"

Exasperating, wasn't it? I was making the kind of headway you make in a struggling dream. Was it a nightmare? I half expected those mountains to break into flame and burn up like paper scenery.

"Tools!" I yelled. "I guess you don't know much about the carpenters' union. An apprentice can't carry tools."

Gad! it was a shot in the dark, but it carried! He actually looked abashed, and he murmured, "That's so," and dropped my arm.

I wonder if it is so. Nothing will throw ignorance harder than ignorance itself and more ignorance. Isn't that so? And right then, when I

was most unsettled, and Horse Face, too, who should I catch sight of but May Gowdy getting off the train fifty feet away. I saw my chance then, and shot one over without so much as getting set for it.

"Well, well!" I said, cheerfully. "You'll have to excuse me. Here's the lady herself."

Bless her adorable ladyship, she had certainly appeared in the nick of time. She hadn't seen me, and didn't see me until I touched her on the arm with a gesture that had a good deal of lordly authority in it, but my voice was humble as the dickens.

"I'm in great danger," I said, in an undertone, "from this hired thug walking up the platform. Show familiarity. Call me Bobolink, call me darling. Cut the surprise element. Ask me if I'm not going to take you over to that restaurant for a bite to eat. Get it in while he is going by."

And May did it—no silly, useless questions, no gasps and crimsonings. She came across in a twinkling and played the part of my wife with a finish that came near to deceiving me, let alone Horse Face. We were deep in some kind of eager interchange when he sauntered past, and he hadn't the heart to interrupt it.

"I'm starving, Bob," May pleaded with me. "You know breakfast is my best meal, too. Aren't you ever going to take me somewhere to eat?"

"Surest thing you know," I agreed.

Horse Face's shadow was near enough for me to step on it, but he must have been satisfied,

because the blow didn't fall—not then. May and I went into that little eating place arm in arm, and I loved that sheriff for putting into my mouth a live argument for close proximity. And do you know, I had got so wrapped up in my part that I forgot my miseries, forgot my empty pockets, forgot everything but my empty stomach and my overflowing heart.

I ordered ham and eggs for two, and all the while I was pouring out my aching heartful of adventure to May Gowdy. Her eyes sparkled and little swirls of flame scurried there in her cheek. She was all sympathy and profile at first. My raggedness must have enlisted her heart, and my gauntness and loneliness, and the fact that the shadow of the law hung over me even as I sat, and not one soul to say a word in my defense—well, it all but made her fill up, May told me on a later occasion. And yet I felt like a conqueror, coming there in a manner new and strange and planting my tattered standard in her heart.

And so you actually came in on the top of that train?" she cried, under her breath.

"You had my promise," I said, quietly.

"Bobolink, you wizard! I don't believe even Jim would have had courage for that."

Can you conceive how that fell on my ears? It was like distant cannonading in the ears of a victorious general, and it shook me right to my foundations.

"I'm not sure he would have had so strong a motive," I said, modestly.

I went on giving snatches of my adventures,

and that bloated pink mountain glared through the window like the unreconciled visage of eternity.

By George! What a moment! What a listener! I felt like the autocrat of that desert, with power over life and death, and the meaning of things came out clear and strong, like a note on a bugle. I saw as never before a light of road magic in that mad chase of freights, in the terror and mystery of those mountain passes.

"Do you know," I cried, "I've had to wait and meet you to see all this myself!"

She blushed like a poppy. I was drunk with her. It's true she made everything memorable simply by listening and leaning toward me unawares. That adventure became hers. She glowed over it, and to this day I haven't the power of seeing it unless animated by the sparkle of that blue eye, so amazed, so thralled. Her bosom rose and fell in swift little impulses. She had to steal her very breath. Gad! how I loved her then! She beat me to my knees, and there was some kindling process between us, I swear. Some challenging fire sprang up and flushed our faces and melted those waxen commonplaces that passed back and forth. A moment like that may be as brief as the spark struck from flint. No matter, it warms. Nothing can rob it of that poignancy it has, burning like a beacon fire in the night of memory.

"And now I suppose you will go right on to Los Angeles," she said, when I stopped to tackle the ham again.

"You know better than that," I said. "Do

you think I will leave you alone here, in this desert, to shift for yourself?"

"I'm nearly there now," she said, with that teasing smile of hers. "It's only a matter of forty miles up this spur track to where the Canyon of the Fools begins."

I told her desperately that sooner than see her chance it alone I would drop down in the desert and let the buzzards pick my eyes out. I put her hypothetical cases. Suppose for any reason Jim wasn't there to meet her. What if he was away on a prospecting trip? She countered by saying quietly that, after all, she was a practically married woman, and her eyes accused me of being in danger of forgetting that. No matter. I dashed on and said that I had certainly earned the right to stand up as her best man, and she met that with a little burst of mocking laughter that was really as good as an endearment in its way.

"Laugh all you want to," I said, savagely. "I don't believe your heart's in this thing. You're throwing yourself away because you don't want to fail a good man in a pinch."

That was a fatal thrust for me. She cut me off short with a swoop of those lids and a diamond point in either eye. I had gone too far, and I knew it. I wanted to throw myself on my knees and ask forgiveness, but I was too prosaic.

May said, icily, "If we have finished we may as well go."

She slipped down off the stool, and it came over me then with sickening force that I hadn't money to square the account. I had never felt

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so sheepish before, and not sheepish only—actually sickened. What to do? The proprietor was out back, and I contemplated calmly walking out on him for one fuddled instant, but I knew, of course, that May would never stand for that.

That's the kind of miserable *impasse* a man can find himself in who is careless about fundamentals. If I had had a gun I would have pushed it into May's hands and asked her to shoot me on the spot.

And then just as suddenly as the emergency had arisen it subsided. May wheeled around and held out her clever hand to me impulsively.

"Bobolink," she just breathed, "we may never meet again in this world. We mustn't part like this. Be friends with me, dear boy."

I took that hand palm to palm, and something was pressed into mine. I ejaculated, "No, no!" feebly, but May retorted, "Haven't I told you your money is counterfeit when you're with me?" and danced through the doorway.

I was standing there with money in my fist—May Gowdy's money.

CHAPTER VII

'ASN'T that a stinging step-down for a young adventurer? It was the nadir of ıng life. Think of my being forced to fall ıg through that rosy cloud and bring up solid earth sprawling! Talking about the verities one instant and finding myself ıg on that girl's hard-won earnings the : a time, too, when the one thing above all [wanted to do was to heap myself up on k!

his time she must have set me down as an ırer of the worst type. What other opinion ihe form, with her romantic views, of a ho could talk the way I had on an empty ? And the worst of it was, she had known empty. She hadn't even had to ask me r I was in a condition to refuse alms.

ı afar off—I was dodging Horse Face -I saw her board the train for Madcap, wn at the head of the Canyon of the Fools Robert Swasey, financial expert and Jim's ıad his office. I followed her up in a ı—empty ore car of the gondola type, y, you understand. Yes, I followed on, : any other course was unthinkable to me, :ause I had begun to mature plans for amass-

ing a huge fortune in gold while sojourning in this country. I followed because I felt in every fiber that it had been decreed from the beginning of time that I should follow this charming and elusive woman, if only to see with my own hot eyes the ruin of my hopes in the consummation of her nuptials with Jim Harper.

Yes, I followed on; but once there, I couldn't find courage to present myself. Young men's courses have queer kinks and straightenings, and pride erects strange barriers. I decided to wait until I was in a position to pay May back her money before obtruding myself. And so I checked myself on the edge of the town, eager as I was to know whether Jim Harper had actually been waiting for her, and it was then and there that I had the luck or the fate to fall in with Tawgy Knute Clint, late of Kansas City.

Old King Knute was a dish-faced gentleman of the tribe of lucky Swedes. He was living in a foundered prairie schooner out in a patch of territory just beyond where the yard engine was kicking in the ore cars. Remnants of a merry-go-round littered the ground not far away. All those slick varnished lions and tigers had been shot to splinters by a gang of frisky punchers, Tawgy said. It was a man's country out here, right. People simply weren't afraid of anything.

When I first spied that massive golden head of my future partner's he was reposing in the shadow cast by a burro which was tied to the rear off wheel of that schooner. The animal had a fantastic assortment of boxes and bundles of all

CHAPTER VII

WASN'T that a stinging step-down for a young adventurer? It was the nadir of my young life. Think of my being forced to fall headlong through that rosy cloud and bring up on the solid earth sprawling! Talking about the eternal verities one instant and finding myself sponging on that girl's hard-won earnings the next, at a time, too, when the one thing above all things I wanted to do was to heap myself up on her neck!

By this time she must have set me down as an adventurer of the worst type. What other opinion could she form, with her romantic views, of a man who could talk the way I had on an empty pocket? And the worst of it was, she had known it was empty. She hadn't even had to ask me whether I was in a condition to refuse alms.

From afar off—I was dodging Horse Face again—I saw her board the train for Madcap, that town at the head of the Canyon of the Fools where Robert Swasey, financial expert and Jim's boss, had his office. I followed her up in a gondola—empty ore car of the gondola type, actually, you understand. Yes, I followed on, because any other course was unthinkable to me, and because I had begun to mature plans for amass-

said, sound of wind and limb, not tied down to any one woman, and not bankrupt, yet, either?"

He looked around him to see if we were alone. There seemed to be a tall, lean genius standing there, perhaps fifty yards off, and watching the ore cars rolling round, but Tawgy decided to chance it in an undertone.

"What do you think that burro has got on its back?" he said to me. "Fifty pounds of dynamite, for one thing."

"Dynamite!"

"Yes. I tucked and wadded that quilt under it as well as I could, but dynamite is queer stuff. Nobody knows how queer, when all is said and done. Those who do know are not here."

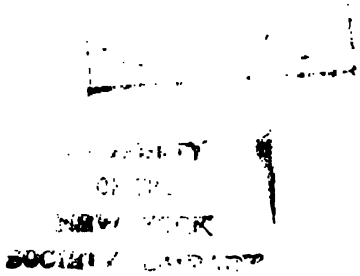
There was a kind of weird plausibility about that, wasn't there? He told me that dynamite was like women he had known—the longer you were with it the less certain you were what would wake the devil in it. The demon of analogies must have pointed that cynicism for him. It certainly wasn't native to him.

"So you are prospecting," I said.

"Hardly. It's too near a sure thing to speak of prospecting. About all I have got to do is blast, muck, and carry the stuff away in sacks, by what they tell me. It is one of the greatest propositions in the Southwest, bar none."

"Gold?"

"Gold and copper. Yes, it is gold country, really," Clint whispered in awed tones, and he looked reverently at those round-shouldered foothills rising in his face. "You may as well say



we are walking on a floor of gold this very minute. There is a blanket of it here as wide as that flat."

I felt myself firing up every minute, and getting the foundations laid for wishing myself into a ready-made fortune. That lucky Swede certainly was long on discourse.

"A sure thing," he breathed at me, and he made a gesture with those milk-white arms of his. "And still there are men who will slave away their lives in cities, satisfied to read about this thing instead of going out to see for themselves, with a pick over their shoulders. No, they are tied to the bell rope, sitting home tying some little girl's ribbons as like as not, while we are here at this moment, hide and hair. Isn't it glorious?"

"You certainly are a persuasive song bird," I put in, and I did get a half glimpse of big doings in the offing whenever that man opened his mouth. "Still," I said, "people tell me there is luck in ladies."

"Why, yes, I don't doubt it. A certain amount of petticoats is good for the soul, that I can't deny. For that matter, I have a sweet lady friend in the South right now that I write to, and she writes me, too—sixteen pages at a lick; but I sincerely figure to stop on the threshold."

If you would believe Clint, he was a cold-blooded analyst. He told me that toiling with the hands never got a man anywhere. Slaving your days away in another man's service was only another form of penal servitude.

"I remember the motto of a former employer

of mine, a great man," he continued. "He told me many times that maybe by taking thought I couldn't add a cubit to my stature, but I could put a good few of them in my jeans. Well, brother, he was dead right."

His eyes sparkled like crystals in a blue grotto, and all the while those big blunt fingers of his waggled and seemed to body his subject in an airy design. They went flying over an invisible loom on which that lucky Swede wove into the stuff of eternity the chance-caught threads of time.

And pretty soon, when he saw that he had struck fire into me, he put his hand on my knee and inquired, "How would you like to help me take the gold out of these hills?"

How would I like it? It ought not to be hard to frame an answer to a question of that sort, should you think? And he didn't wait for my answer, for that matter. He assumed that it would be the delight of my life to go into those hills and toil there, coming out as rich as Crœsus after one, two, or three months. He outlined to me the situation. It was a big picture, done in Clint's vigorous strokes. There you had on the one hand Swasey, his employer, a man who had never yet failed to get capital when he needed it, and a man who knew gold down to the ground and under; and on the other hand, Sebastian Polhill, leagued with all the powers of evil and banded against Swasey and his cohorts.

They had once been friends, and were now sworn enemies. Polhill owned the Black Prince here in Madcap; Swasey was master of the True Friend.

These mines adjoined, and an order of the federal court had recently forced Swasey to quit pursuing the only vein of any consequence in his mine through the side lines of the Black Prince. The court, in short, had pinched the life out of the True Friend, as much so as if the honorable gentlemen composing that august body had taken up that fated property between thumb and finger; but Swasey was not the man to be put down so easily.

"There's an estate twenty miles down the canyon that he's been looking over," Clint said, zealously—"the Sprowl estate—and in his letter to me he said the stuff was there. 'Mr. Clint,' he wrote me, 'I'm not afraid to set it down in black and white, the stuff is there. I'm too old a bird to be fooled when it comes to hard rock, and I'm not fooled. I can't be fooled. Old Sprowl has straddled it, only he doesn't know where it is, and I do. He's given me an option to bond the estate and work it, and the upshot of it is, if you'll come in on a basis to be agreed on we're both made men.'"

Clint read these words out of a much-thumbed letter which he then ushered suavely into his hip pocket again.

"Success in this world is only a question of nipping in," he averred. And the proof that gold actually did reside in the Sprowl property could be drawn from the fact that Sebastian Polhill, the owner of the Black Prince, had gone down into the canyon himself; that poor old blind man had gone down there himself, with his rascal of a mine

manager, and the two of them had squatted on a property adjoining the Sprowl estate, a claim that went by the name of Pandora.

"It's there and they know it!" Clint said, excitedly. "What else would lead a man with half his face torn away by an explosion to leave comfortable quarters and go down there and cruise round in that rat hole if the ore wasn't there?"

"He's blind?" I said. "What does a blind man want with gold?"

"To buy himself new eyes," Clint grinned. "There's nothing gold won't do if a man is a mind to think so. Well, what do you say? I want a partner—we'll agree later on the basis—and I can see at a glance that you are one man in a million."

I murmured that nothing would suit me better, but that I had a little matter of business to clean up here. I was sewed up for the time being. I couldn't give up that faint little chance—don't you see?—that maybe May Gowdy hadn't found Jim Harper, after all.

"Take your time," Clint said. "It will be three or four days before I get orders, probably."

He wrenched the shirt away from his massive throat and looked away with glistening eyes toward those captivating, those entrancing, those intriguing hills. I began feeling picaresquish, if I may slip that word over without giving too much offense. It's no more possible, as a great scholar has said, to define a word by using other words, than it is to describe in words themselves the shifting hues on a pigeon's neck, and I won't tell

you what picaresquish means. Ascertain it for yourself.

"Listen!" Clint said.

He came close and dominated me with those flashing irises of his, according to a method which he later told me he had extracted from a book of salesmanship under the chapter entitled "How to Dominate Your Man." You show the whites of your eyes all around, for one thing, and then you bring your mug so infernally close to the other fellow's that he has to look into first one eye and then the other. It's confusing as the dickens, and I don't doubt does what it's guaranteed to do.

As I say, the lucky Swede favored me with this dominating glare, and said: "I am going to be perfectly frank with you, because I feel that you are my friend. We are partners. I am going in there to locate a pocket of gold on the Sprowl estate, and I count on every last ounce in your body to see me through. We know it is there, mind you. That's one comfort. We have figured in every possibility, and we know it is there—a thick, ropy vein—what is known as a fissure vein. We haven't lost it, but we don't quite know where it is. Do you follow along, brother?"

I swallowed hard and nodded, and Clint said, more calmly, "It may be a long job, and then again it may not."

He looked slantwise at that purple mountain as if by a quirk of mental arithmetic he could calculate just how long he would be in carting it all away.

"Where does it get its name?" I broke in on

him. "They call it the Canyon of the Fools, I understand."

Clint laughed heartily at that question, and told me that was ancient history.

"The fools are all dead long ago," he chuckled. "They were the bunch that panned the sands of the canyon with cradles and Long Toms in the old days. They were in too much of a hurry to spend it or send it to the mint, brother. A pinch was a dollar, a teaspoonful was an ounce, a wineglassful was a hundred dollars, and a tumblerful was a thousand, just the same as cash on the nail."

A tumblerful of gold! Spontaneous riches, easy cush! Gad! My tongue was hanging out! Old King Knute said that a man in those days was liable to turn over a bowlder with his foot and find half a hatful of dust under it. It warmed him to mention that circumstance, and it warmed me to hear it. Clint did have a weird power of projecting his visions and kindling hope in other men. He was an optimist, and almost with the first breath I fell into an attitude toward him almost of worship. That great yellow god with his blue eyes could summon Odin and Thor to his aid, as like as not. I put nothing past him, and he put nothing past himself, for that matter. Failure was nothing but the bogy that kept weaker men from closing with a good thing.

There I was, hanging on his least whisper. I was reading favorable omens in the gurgle of his pipe, even, when he checked himself and canted his head mysteriously toward the merry-go-round.

That tall genius over there had drawn nearer

and put one caressing hand on the mane of a wrecked lion. We still had a profile view of him, though. He had narrowed his eyes apparently on something nearly out of sight. He wore spurs and leathers and two gun pockets, and he looked prickly every way. Nearly everything in desert country has a thorn or a fang, and this gentleman was no exception. I seemed right away to recognize his spiritual kinship with the horse-faced man at Haggett Junction, somehow. He was burned to a cinder by desert suns, and I caught a glimpse of a corded neck, and a sulphur-colored mustache spun out to a few crinkly ends, just two or three tawny filaments floating against that burning blue sky.

Jove! it was effective! In the same eyeflash, too, I noted that he was wearing a roll-brim hat with a high crown, and that brim mushroomed out past his ears in grand style.

"You haven't had any business with that gazabo, have you?" Clint said, seriously.

"I was just wondering if he mightn't have some with me," I muttered.

I added hurriedly that I would think that proposition over and report in a day or two. I slipped away on the dark side of a string of ore cars, expecting to be followed, nabbed, and incarcerated as certainly as I sit here. Nothing of that kind took place, and eventually I got ashamed of my panic and ventured into town. Right away I stumbled into Swasey's place. I couldn't have overlooked it for long, anyhow. It riveted the eye by means of a big lump of fairy quartz in the window, with a huge golden patch slopping down its

side in gobs and strings, and a hatchet sticking in it. I think Jim Harper had spoken of that hatchet in his letter. The name Robert Swasey was gilded in bold letters on the window, and over that in a sort of rainbow arch were the words that meant all the world to me:

ONE GOOD INVESTMENT BEATS A LIFETIME OF TOIL.

That was the first hint of easy cush I had seen in the West, outside of conversation, but it had a favorable ring. It certainly had. It jingled and jangled in my head, like the opening line of some great epic, and I found myself staring past it, staring through the letters at that lean lath of a man sitting at a desk.

Swasey himself. I hadn't a doubt of it. His face was dead white—foxy, too, to my way of thinking. He wore a black-velvet smoking jacket and a gaudy brocaded vest under that, and he was playing with a massive watch charm, twirling it over his forefinger. I wasn't long in making out that that charm was nothing but a lump of raw gold fashioned into a miniature skull and set with silver crossbones. I couldn't help a chill creeping through me, somehow, and then a warm flash followed it when I saw May herself stepping out from between the doors of a tall, thin, green safe that stood against the side wall.

The same May, every line and movement of her. She sat down to a typewriter and began to peck at the keys with those girlish taper fingers. Her face was partly turned toward me, and the blood

sang in my ears at the expression I saw haunting it. For if ever I saw loneliness and grief and mystification written on the human countenance it was written on May's, and I knew right then that Jim hadn't come through.

He hadn't met her and he hadn't married her. She was languishing in there, as good as abandoned on the threshold of the desert, a nugget of virgin gold dropped by a madman for a madman's reason, probably. What was her condition? Why had she been forced to take menial employment in the office of that foxy gentleman with the golden slogan on his window? Wasn't it palpable that she didn't have money enough to go home again, and didn't my chance look better than ever to nip in at the eleventh hour?

It did, I grant you, and still for the dear life of me I couldn't or wouldn't frame it the way I had dreamed of doing a thousand times. If she had only looked up! But she didn't look up, and I moved on.

If you had been in my place you would have gone in there on all-fours, probably, and been precipitate and carried the redoubt. As for me, I couldn't do it. It wasn't in me to. I was wolf-hungry, for one thing, and I was ashamed to show her what desperate straits I was in for lack of food again. I had remnants of her money still sticking in my fist, it's true—not much, but fragments of it—but I had sworn not to use it. You have to remember that I was eggful of romance, and that she had succored me more than once already. She, a mere girl, had bolstered me up at the end of one of

my biggest feats, and I wasn't going to be weak enough to give her a second opportunity—not if I knew it. In all the romances I had ever read the shoe was on the other foot when the pinch came. It was the girl who was in danger, and it was the man who horned in and eased out with that pale burden just barely palpitant with life. Wasn't it a predicament for a callow youth to find himself in, where he was dealing with a woman who had at her beck the freshness of the budded rose and the experience of forty centuries?

I suppose, too, that part of my misery at this time came from dearth of tobacco. I had sold everything to follow her and keep soul and body together; everything movable on my person, even to my pipe in its snake-skin case, and I was tigerish all the time for lack of a smoke. Harrowing—what?

I had to know where she lived, of course, and I found out by the simple expedient of following her home at a distance. She walked fast and didn't look right or left, not like my May at all, and I wondered wrathily who or what had cowed that proud spirit this way. It was growing on to dusk, and I trailed her right up to the porch of a blistered-looking frame house with yellowed creeping Jennies out front; a house shingled in alternate belts of mud brown and baleful ocher, of sculptured shingles, and to the right of the porch loomed a tower with a lot of gingerbread and beading. It terminated in a huge wooden spike, and had evidently been hung up in the days of the jig-saw madness.

I leaned on the fence until a light sprang out midway of the tower—May's light; and nothing would do then, of course, but I must lodge there, too—in that very place. A young million of rose-lined contingencies were swarming in my head. I didn't want to meet May face to face, I ought to postulate, and yet I was dying to be under the same roof with her, and I finally did screw myself up to the point of ringing the bell. A sleepy red-headed witch, all of two hundred pounds on the hoof, came to the door.

"I'm looking for a room," I said, in hushed tones.

She didn't think she had a room. How did she think she was going to thwart my resolution to lodge under the same roof with May Gowdy? I groveled, I begged for six feet of space, I told her I was going to work in the mine in the morning and that it simply wrecked me to look for rooms. She brushed the hair out of her eyes and recollected the little hall bedroom.

"There's nothing but a mattress there, though," she warned me.

"If the place has walls, that's enough," I said.

I engaged it for the night, and paid twenty-five cents for it out of May's money that I had sworn not to touch. The mattress was rolled up and tied with a rope. I untied and unrolled it and lay down in darkness, beating all over with a sense of my adventurousness and uplifted by the thought that already perhaps May was dreaming on the other side of that wall, and that she needed a strong arm to lean on if ever a girl needed it.

I was up and out of the house at dawn, and

showed up at the main shaft of the Black Prince when the day shift was waiting for the cage. By Mars! those were lean days! For there was no work to be had at that mine, you know; there was no work to be had anywhere.

I came away with my knees waggling under me, and by that time the iron had entered my soul. I wouldn't burst in on May in that starving condition, and I wouldn't go back to King Knute, either, for fear he would argue me into lighting out with him for the Canyon of the Fools, or force me into accepting sustenance which might hurry me into a premature contract. I was still chained to that girl's chariot wheel.

And before I could turn round it was night again. What was I going to do then? I might have hunted up Tawgy in his prairie schooner. I ought to have been satisfied to lie under the stars and dream those dreams of plenty to which my famishing condition naturally entitled me. Instead of which I drifted insensibly back into the neighborhood of that house with the jig-saw tower and the creeping Jennies.

Come rack, come rope, I did mean to have the consolation of knowing I was near May nights. And yet I couldn't bring myself to doke up my last two bits for that second night's lodging. I sauntered up and down in the dark in front of that house like a panther in a cage, for hours and hours, watching the light in May's room, conjuring back those happy hours we had spent, feeling her light touch on my arm and repeating odd fragments of our talk. I thought up perils for her, too, and

saved her from them, and I wondered whether it wouldn't bring tears into those sweet eyes if she knew that I had eaten next to nothing in forty-eight hours, all for love of her.

I'm ashamed to tell you how long a time passed before I thought of a simple way to get up to that room again. Because when it came it was gloriously simple, you know, like all inspired thoughts.

I walked up! Yes, sir, opened the front door, felt my way past that treacherous walnut hat-tree with the loose, straight-out pegs, where stiff hats couldn't lie quiet, walked up softly without meeting a soul, and tiptoed into that hall bedroom. Like a ghost I unrolled my mattress and lay down. Everything seemed jake if only the red-headed witch didn't take it into her head to look in on me. My luck held even in that particular, and I slept like a dog.

In the morning, as before, I woke early, rolled the mattress up and tied it again and stood it in a corner. There was something automatic about the whole egregious business. I felt serene as a sleepwalker, and I was hardly conscious of having committed a crime. Of course the thought did just flicker into my head, "Suppose that blessed red-haired baby should dodge in here and catch me red-handed?"

But I decided that I could tell her plausibly enough that I was on the point of re-engaging the room, and had merely looked in there to see if it was occupied. In that case she couldn't very well hang anything on me, more than a breach of good manners, could she?

Wouldn't it seem as if that would work out? Why not? Even supposing she made the discovery in the morning, how was she to know I had been there all night? I looked sleepy, you say? All right, so I did when I first came to her. I was sleepy all the time—sleepy and hungry. What is it that gives a room a look of having been slept in? Rumpled bedclothes, as much as anything. But there weren't any rumpled bedclothes there. The room looked as fresh as ever.

Reason it how you will, to me there was a lack of moral reckoning in all that business, a usurping dream quality. There was something humorous and ceremonial in the untying and unrolling of that mattress, and I felt like a conjurer preparing his mat. And in the morning I was wafted out of the house on the wings of impulse at a time when my landlady was conferring out back with the meat man. My conscience was so clear that I had actually overslept.

The truth is, I couldn't actually believe that I was beating the woman out of her rent. My performances were only part of that mystical poetry that sprang up like wild flowers in the path of that sweet mistress of my haunted soul, May Gowdy.

I have only the vaguest recollection of the events of that day, but I do remember that it was haunted by that sheriff. Maricopa Jim, the man was called. He kept floating into the corner of my eye, his copper-colored jaw slanted away from me, one corded hand trifling with his mustache. I fled him like a pestilence, and when night came and still no news I slunk back to May Gowdy's

and my lodging house again. Wild horses couldn't have held me back from floating up on that stoop like the ghost of yesterday, which I veritably was. The door swung in receptively. I stole upstairs.

So far, good. Life is all composed of these small repetitions. But the moment I laid my hand to the doorknob of that hall bedroom I felt a soft, yielding pressure from the other side. Can you figure that out? My heart stopped and weird fancies beat thick over my head. For just one second I fancied that May might have twigged me and hid herself playfully in there to welcome me, if that was what scaring me out of a year's growth consisted of. And in the same fractional part of a second I decided that I had been detected, and that the police had been artfully installed to watch. I was familiar with this custom of placing police about the house to await the return of the criminal to the seat of his crime.

An omen as dark as that might have stopped stronger men than I was, but I told myself that my destiny wasn't the only one implicated and that I was bound to go through with it. I summoned every ounce of strength in me, and with the courage of desperation I took the knob in both hands again and pushed—hard. The pressure again met me—that same soft but dogged opposition—and suddenly it was withdrawn.

How simple, after all! I had rolled that mattress up and stood it on end, as you remember, and it had fallen down against the door.

Simple! You are probably tempted to smile, and yet it had a horrible effect on me. I untied

the mattress rope in the dark with shaking fingers, but I couldn't adjust myself to the embrace of Morpheus, filled as I was with this indefinable sensation of mystery and disaster that seemed to shoot up through me from the soles of my feet—swarming premonitions.

I lay there quaking, and for the first time I did see dimly that my reiterated presence in that house, unsolicited and unsuspected, did involve a kind of enormity—moral enormity, if you choose. That inanimate mattress taught me more than a prison sentence, and got me focusing on some of Sydney Hecker's well-known views. I literally caught a glimpse of myself from his angle, I believe, at that exact instant, and there must have been a certain sort of mental telepathy involved, because like a bolt out of the blue I heard Syd's voice outside the door, on the stairs, and the creak of those same stairs under the weight of Mrs. Redhead.

I sprang up with a singing in my ears, thinking that the delirium of my starvation diet had me in its clutches, although, really, by keeping easy in your mind, you can minimize the effects even of a total lack of rations.

Even in my inflamed state I couldn't have mistaken Syd's voice, and I didn't mistake it. I rolled up my mattress in a panic, tied it with a swift timber hitch, and sank down back of it. I wasn't too soon. That woman's hand was already at the door, and when the light of her hand lamp peered in I was by great good luck—as I thought—in deep shadow.

"There's nothing but a mattress in here," she

was saying in that weary voice, "but if you can make shift with that I'll let you have it for two bits."

Syd said in broken tones that he was glad of the chance to lie down anywhere, and that he was going to apply for work in some of the offices to-morrow. Could I have so utterly misjudged that man, and was he, too, trailing May?

Mrs. Redmop said she wished him luck, she was sure, but there was something mistrustful in her voice.

As soon as the door clicked Syd put the lamp down and overthrew the mattress.

"You!" Syd breathed as if he had been stung.

"Soft pedal on the surprise," I whispered, and my fingers were all but at his throat. I could see at a glance that he had met with some kind of shocking reverse, even in that short time; and if ever a bird looked sick and out of song, this bird did. He looked impecunious as hell, for one thing. There was a sobbing catch in his voice, and those sad eyes of his were as big as saucers, and teary, too, and a fine sweat had collected under the lower lids. He had some scratches on those heavy soft arms of his with the big light-tan freckles, and his button shoes were down to a frazzle. He probably had run out of gingersnaps, I surmised.

It was worse than that, as it turned out. I got the story out of him by degrees. After shaking me, that same old streak had cropped out in him again, and he had let two thugs board him and beat him up and take practically every last cent away from him—the snake ring, too—and they

had ended up by dropping him in the cind twenty miles out of Haggett Junction. Tha what I call wild justice. Syd was at a standstill didn't know whether to go forward or back; b finally leg-motored to the Junction, where th advised him to come up here to Madcap, on t strength of a little money he found in his cc lining, and get a job as a stenographer in a bar He had told them he was an indoor man, probabl but you can imagine what likelihood there w of jobs like that going begging out there.

"I don't know what I'm going to do now," said, desperately. "I'm little better than a trar now, I fear."

I advised him to telegraph for funds, but said there was nobody back home with mon enough to see the wire if he did send it colle They had been against that wild business, anyw in the first place. Wild? What defeated me w to hear him call that sheep car wild. Wild shee Think that over.

"Why not wire the head of this division to sic track that sheep car until you can overtake it I whispered. "You still have some gingersna there, haven't you, cached in the hay?"

I had kept at him pretty close with whisper questions to divert his mind from the equivo fact of my own presence there in a room he h hired for the night; but, of course, he was bou to get round to it, and while I was silently u rolling the mattress again he asked me point bla how I happened to be there.

I whispered gayly that it was in the role of

l fairy to see him tucked in for the night, but wasn't convinced. He presently made the k that it was his secret conviction that I had :en in here. Had broken in! It was that p car all over again. He looked at me bitterly I saw that it was time for a change of tactics. ıt up and took him by the shoulders in a ming man's grip.

Do you know who is in that next room?" I ioned with my lips. He nodded his head bly. Yes, he did know. May Gowdy. She been so kind as to give him this address.

She is in danger," I said, and I really thought hough I didn't at that time know from what ter to expect the blow to fall. "I suppose know Jim Harper's not here."

e nodded again. And then I admitted flat- ed that I had tracked in there without saying hing to anybody—like a thief in the night, if ıose—but it was with the high moral purpose ielding that unsuspecting girl from the conse- ces of a dastardly plot of some kind. Never l what kind. It was to be near her in her of need. Did he blame me?

ell, yes, he did blame me. It wasn't moral. oaching on that room was a worse thing, if hing, than stealing a ride in a box car. Then ı, suppose I should be discovered in there him, wouldn't it look as if he had condoned presence there? By George! it might even to unfriendly eyes, as if he, Sydney, had rived the whole business to sleep two for the of one! Don't you see?

Would you believe that a man's mind could work up a petty vein like that, when the woman he loved, or had loved, and who had rejected him and was now in danger, and possibly recapturable, was lying asleep in the next room? With only that thin partition—

Syd sank down on the mattress with a groan, and whispered that his position would be thoroughly false if he allowed me to remain in that room.

"You've got to get out," he said, glaring at me.

"If you don't lower your voice," I hissed, I'll throttle you where you sit. I mean business!"

Gad! I certainly did! I was right on my toes by then. I couldn't get over that impression of disaster impending that had sprung up in me at the opposition of that mattress. Syd sat there absolutely still, and in that silence there came a knock at the door.

You know, to me there is always something terrifying in a knock. It's like a summons. It smites the knees and stops the heart and calls up the guilty soul to its account. You don't know what the devil may lie at the back of it. I stood up there in that semidarkness, full of confused images and jumpy impulses, and relief was my chief emotion when I saw that frowzy red head come leering in on our privacy.

"So—there are two of you!" she said. "I thought so. I thought when I let you in, my laddie, you were up to that old trick, and I got up out of bed to make sure."

She was talking to Syd. I don't think she even recognized me as a former lodger.

"It's all a mistake," he wailed. "I'm not responsible for this man. He was here when I came in."

"Do you think I haven't got eyes in my head?" she cried. She was exasperated and you can't blame her. "This room was empty when I let you into it. Do you mean to stand there and tell me that you don't know this man? Never saw him before in your life, I suppose."

Gad! that was Syd's great moment!

"I can't say that—no," he faltered. "I do know him, as it happens. That is, I've had dealings with him."

"Come! Doke up another two bits or out you go, the both of you," she said, and she held out her hand. "I've stood enough shenanigan from you two. There's a deputy sheriff rooming right in the house, and I can rout him out if I have to. I will rout him out, too, if I don't get my money. You two great hulks, you ought to be ashamed."

She looked hostile, and she started going back along the hall as if she meant to fulfill that threat. She stopped right under that heavy oil painting of Pikes Peak that had a triangular tear in the canvas right at the peak and showed an area of homely brown wall paper through.

Syd dragged himself over the sill, white to the gills—he didn't have that added two bits, it transpired—and that virago called out at the top of her lungs, "If you take one step nearer I shall scream."

And then the door at Syd's elbow opened and May Gowdy was standing there in a blue dressing gown, her eyes as blue as blue, too, and all those

raven locks flowing over her shoulders and loosing some kind of musky essence—unless I imagined it. She looked lithe and pretty and not afraid of anything in this world, and one reason for that lack of fear may have been that she had heard our voices.

"What's in the wind now?" she said curtly to Mrs. Redhead.

"It's all right, dearie," that lady said, soothingly. "Go back to bed. There are men in the house if we need them. We've just got in a couple of undesirables, that's all, I'm afraid."

Poor old Syd stood there, shipwrecked in his shoes, as Joe Carney used to say, and words failed him. Because, do you know, May Gowdy looked from Syd to me and back again without a glint of recognition in those blue eyes! Not a glimmer! Syd made a kind of despairing lurch toward her, but she speared him with that cold look, and only said to the landlady: "They really don't seem to have bad faces. Do you think so? They're young, that's all, poor things. Why, Mrs. Hanson, that thinnest one is hardly more than a boy, and he doesn't look as if he had had a square meal in weeks! Do let them stay!"

Hardly more than a boy! That from May, who was hardly more than a girl herself, when it came to that—a mere slip of a girl—and still those pitying accents had me strung right up to concert pitch, and I don't know what nonsense I might not have blurted out if Syd hadn't been beforehand with me by lisping out in his torture voice, "Why, don't you know me?"

"What's that?" said Mrs. Hanson. "Do you know him, dearie?"

"More people have been mistaken for me!" May cut in. "I must be an awfully common type, I'm afraid. Mrs. Hanson, I assure you I never saw either of these young men before in my life."

That delicate face was calm, and that oriole's voice for once as hard as chilled steel. May stood there fingering the yellow-silk tassels on her dressing gown, and everything about her seemed to bear out that statement of hers, too. She looked like a glorious being from another world than ours, and you would have bet your last dollar that she had never suffered the contamination of our friendship.

Syd bowed his face in his hands and groaned as if here was a kind of poetic justice, too, and neither of us could believe our ears when, right on top of that, May began suggesting to Mrs. Hanson that it really seemed too bad to put us out of doors.

"It's not as if they were yeggmen," she urged, and she put it up to the other lady flat whether oftentimes it didn't make criminals out of youths who were not really bad, only ill advised, to receive some sharp evidence of man's inhumanity to man. And do you know, she went on glibly and offered to pay for our night's lodging personally, the dear innocent.

Think of the irony of that! I couldn't believe my ears. I still had two bits of her money that I had been holding out, too.

"I'll take the responsibility for their being on

the premises," May said. "And oh, Mrs. Hanson, take them down and give them some of that cold meat that was left over from supper. They look ravenous."

I made a horrible noise in the back of my throat. I meant to signify that I didn't want anything to eat, and I couldn't intelligently syllable that lie.

And last of all, out came that famous bag of May's from some recess or other—I believe that's the word—yes, sir, that same old crocodile hide that I had picked up in Chicago with the bar pin and the plaid sample in it. That bag was responsible for this whole charming nightmare, and I felt as if I was on the point of either waking or having a blood vessel break in my brain when I saw May take money out of it and press it on our hostess, Mrs. Hanson.

CHAPTER VIII

PICTURE us down there in Mrs. Hanson's kitchen eating slabs of cold corned beef at May Gowdy's expense! The acute agony and shame of it, and at the same time the convincing flavor of those broken viands! I was certainly a hot sketch. I had been actually proud of that terrific hunger of mine. I had had visions of intervening decisively in May's favor at my last gasp, unavoidably on the threshold there between life and death, and then sinking back and feeling her arms warm about me in one delicious, last, despairing, fond embrace—and having some competent authority discover that I was starving and too proud to admit it.

I fancied dimly hearing somebody saying, "When did this man eat last?" and I always roused myself and muttered, "On Tuesday, but why all this fuss?" and it would be Friday or Saturday then, and May's eyes shining like stars. Can you merge with me?

It was a far cry from that vision to the shape actuality ultimately took—what? In place of that gorgeous self-abnegation, here I was eating out of May's pocketbook, that blessed crocodile skin, like the veriest beggar, and I couldn't help it. I was drawn down there into that kitchen by some

power stronger than mine. Don't tell me that the stomach is the stronghold of the moralities! It's a throwback, a ravening barbarian, and I don't know its equal for stripping the veneer off our tinsel civilization.

I hadn't eaten for so long that I was afraid to do more than swallow a few mouthfuls, but I put the rest in my pocket secretly. Mrs. Hanson stood over us pretty consistently at that.

"You great calves!" she said. "You can thank your lucky stars that girl upstairs had more compunction for you than I'd have. I know your kind."

It butchered Syd in his stall to be classed with me, and he gave her a dumb outcast look, and went on swallowing tears and beef at one and the same gulp. I was at a total loss for words, myself, and I crept back to that hall bedroom and slept like a dead man, with Syd by my side. It was the parable of misery and the strange bedfellows all over again.

I woke up at dawn from habit, although the room was paid for. Seared into my brain was that picture of May standing there and denying all knowledge of me, and then heaping coals of fire on my luckless head. I was a dying ember, right. Why had she refused me recognition? Had I got outside the pale altogether? Or was it pique? Perhaps that was more likely. She thought I had abandoned her here, after all those devoted professions of mine, too.

This was the first glimpse I had got of the thing from her angle, and after that I couldn't blame

her. How could I expect her to interpret the meaning in all these queer, shy subterfuges my infernal pride had set on foot? "Hardly more than a boy!" Those words echoed and re-echoed in my brain. I writhed at them. She was so devilish mature. I remembered the motherly tenderness of that kiss she had given me in Omaha, the fearful prophetic vision of trouble ahead for me that it conveyed, and I was wild—wild to think she had refused from the beginning to engage me with her whole personality, and still refused—bitter, too.

That emotion boiled up in me again and again, and in the end I left Syd capsized on that mattress and fled the house. I didn't care if I never saw him again. I wanted to leave everything behind me; I was ready to jump out of my own skin if that would mean forgetfulness; but by the time I had got out on that cement bridge over the big wash I began to feel awfully hungry again, and it came over me in one intensive flash that I had meat in my pocket.

My fingers closed over it; I took it to my mouth. It was in vain that I tried to stand by that resolution I had made overnight not to be beholden to that superior young woman any further. I dropped my principles like rags and sank my teeth into that corned beef. She had washed her hands of me, would probably meet me with a cold stare, and yet here I was experiencing the reviving effects of her largesse.

About sundown of that day, furthermore, I got another little whiff of it when I purchased a T-bone

grateful tears would fall on
too late, and bring me
warmth of their penitence,

But what is man? As
immediate effect of that fo
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that it was my move, and
ment Incarnación's softly

life by such a question, coming from a source like that, you may well pause and echo it and falter for a fit reply. Whither, indeed? I answered her salutation in Spanish—I thanked gracious Heaven for my Spanish grandmother, then, who had taught me the language as a child—and I noted then that this splendid creature had a grappling iron in each eye. Those eyes met you and detained you and stopped you dead, as much so as if a bar had been stretched across your path, as much so as if you had been hit a blow under the heart by a precalculating opponent.

I can't put the things in words with credit to myself. I only know that when a man encountered that gaze he was infolded in it; he felt a heightening in the portents; and he was visited by a conviction that it was moments like these that made the inwardness of history.

I know my own perceptions were whittled down so fine on the instant that the merest whisper of a dead leaf came to my ear fraught with subtle meaning. Things had clarified to such an extent that I felt as if I was equipped for looking through stone walls. I swept that providentially encountered woman into my arms, and there we were, without let or hindrance in the furtive twilight, threading the mazes of the dance. Wonderful and powerful hour!

I hadn't even the grace to reflect at the time that my very ability to close with an opportunity like this I owed to May. Those lessons in foot culture were priceless. Mexican tom-toms were beating at the back somewhere as regular as a

pulse—it was a dissolute strain, there's no gainsaying that—stars were coming out, too, and I went turning and turning there, the creature of one perfumed hour, cheek to cheek, palm to palm, knee to knee, with high adventure. I liked it. I loved it. Her name was Incarnación, and I called her Inky.

I got her story out of her, of course, by fits and snatches. She was the daughter of a Spanish grandee, a pure Castilian, who in a moment of erratic impulse had misallied herself with a Mexican general, General Terrazas—Terrazas the Terrible—and bitterly she had lived to rue it. She had married him at the top of the tide, it appeared. The general was then master of an entire province, the owner of a fabulously rich gold mine, and the sole dictator of a tight little army, ample for the preservation of his province.

And what had happened? Only what might have been expected in that land of rich but uncertain promise. The general's enemies had turned a subterranean watercourse into his gold mine and drowned it. His gold supply had been stopped at its source. His army, from being a well-fed and fit instrument of vengeance, had degenerated into a thing of shreds and patches, had dissolved like morning mist, and the fat province had been wrested from his powerless hands by a greasy rascal at the head of three hundred children of night like himself.

"These hands that have blazed with diamonds," Inky whispered to me, fiercely, "do you know what use he finds for them now, that old carrion

with his soul of a wine measure? I am to wash clothes with them in the Canyon of the Fools, while my lord and master searches for more gold, the stuff of revolutions. What do I care for war? Am I a follower of armies? He stripped the rings from my fingers to buy soldiers and more soldiers. He beat me when I cried out. Oh, I could show you bruises!"

My surging soul throttled me at these disclosures, as you may well believe.

"You should leave him at once," I said. And I've no doubt my voice was sympathetic.

Tell me, if you can, why the predicament of a young and pretty woman is more affecting to a man than the miseries of the old and the decrepit? I visioned myself in the act of confronting Terrazas with the evidences of his criminal mistreatment of his fair wife; withholding her from his arms, sweeping her into mine and bidding him take himself off into the limbo of forgotten things. And Incarnación could see at a glance what was taking place in me—that's the beauty of it. She drew herself half out of my arms and shook her head desperately.

"No, he is too strong," she whispered. "There are men still faithful to him, planted all about, under every bush. They lurk under the stones, the centipedes. Many times I have tried to run away from this monster, but they have brought me back. Always they have brought me back."

"Go to the authorities," I said, fiercely.

The fires of my forward-looking imagination

had purged Inky of her present spouse, and a
ready I was visioning her as the pride of m
hacienda under some glowing sky filled wit
prophetic stars. I spun out a lavish lifetime wit
her in those few fiercely burning seconds, and
was only recalled by her guarded voice soundin
close in my ear as we swayed together.

"The authorities! No, they do not see thi
with your eye of sympathy, *amigo*. They ar
cruel. They laugh. They say: 'Go back to you
brave general, my pretty lady. He will brin
you luck yet.'"

"There is a law in this land," I hissed over he
shoulder, and then the music stopped.

We filtered through a side door. There was
lot of positive electricity in the air, I know tha
I remember guiding her into the shadow of a grou
of fig leaves and of standing there on that blu
painted veranda with the clank of an artesia
well in my ears.

"He is jealous—the general," Inky said, leanin
against a vine-clad post. "He does me the hono
to be jealous."

"It's a disease," I said, positively.

"A disease?" The lovely head was stoppe
the eyes questioned me. "Yes, perhaps. I kno
this jealousy. Where I love I could kill, mysel
for jealousy."

She gave me a tigress flash from those splendi
eyes, and I believed her. Sitting there on th
railing, within one of her, I felt as if I had got m
fingers on a firebrand; but with that head of r
bellion in me at her unhappy fate I didn't care.

"It is in our blood, this little spark, these stinging little flames running hither and yon. And you, too, are of our blood, *amigo.*"

"Partly," I let fall.

She laid her hand over mine. I braced myself, crushed a fig leaf in my free hand, but that apparent liberty she was taking had nothing but a warning at its end.

"Take care! That sheriff! That vile Maricopa! He is looking at us through the window. No, you must not turn your head; but I tell you he is there, with his great moving whiskers. Why does he haunt you, my Roberto?"

She had drawn a cigarette from some part of her person, lit it, and let blue smoke escape out of her mouth in little yawns. Breath by breath, those tiny blue masses of smoke went swirling upward, altering, as if some tragic shape were seeking to body itself forth there. I had an exciting appreciation of the surprising and even fatal ease with which this adventure had been set on foot, and I had a sense of lurking dangers, too.

Why, indeed, did that lank genius of a sheriff haunt me? Did he suppose that I was unable to provide for myself in fitting fashion? Did he think—could he argue from my empty pockets that I was therefore incapable of coming by fit nourishment honestly? Doesn't it seem to you that the charge of vagrancy, brought against a man on no better evidence than a lack of cash—the absence of a few greasy silver certificates and iron men from his coat lining—doesn't it seem to you as if such a charge was nothing but a crying

insult to that whole tribe of men who choose to travel light? What did he know of my motives, my plans, my capacities? Had I thrown myself on the town? Had I robbed or pillaged? Had I touched the criminal calendar at any point—save one, perhaps?

No, but because it was known that I had a stomach I must suffer for it. Irony of ironies, it was known to be empty, that invisible internal malefactor, and it was assumed—without warrant, I say—that I would take any means to fill it.

"Yes, why does he haunt me?" I whispered, bitterly. "Echo answers, 'Why?' He will end by clapping me in the canary, too, and I stand here powerless to prevent it."

"Why do you stay? You have legs," Inky dropped out, in that beautiful mellow contralto of hers, and there was a hint of amusment in the thoughtful curl of that smoke through her expanded nostrils. "Ah, but you need not tell me! When you take these chances, you men, there is a woman at the back of it."

"There was a woman," I said, sadly.

I incautiously told her the whole of my bitter humiliation: my mad flight over the prairie and the desert on train tops, in that sheep car, all but ground under the wheels sometimes, and always with one end in view—May's welfare. I outlined to Inky my fascinated love for May, my prowlings in the vicinity of the jig-saw tower, and the final bitter moment when May had refused to recognize me. I said nothing about those subsequent proceedings in the kitchen.

"What would you have done?" I said, softly, and Inky, on the end of an impetuous exhalation, flung her cigarette swiftly over the rail and stooped toward me.

"Otherwise, *amigo*," she whispered, and I felt in every vein and bone that she spoke truth, and that she would have done otherwise.

"Tell me, is he there still?" I murmured.

"He is there still, *amigo*. What do we care for him? Sing me some careless song. Ah, that fearful man, he will make holes in me with his eyes!"

The direction of her glance told me that he must be standing in one of those long windows at my back. What odds? I threw back my head and sang softly a little song in Spanish. You quite likely know it:

> "*Besame, besame, besame,*
> *Quierame, besame, con tu bocita . . .*"

"Kiss me, kiss me, kiss me, love me, kiss me, with that small mouth. Ah, would you learn of a love that loves you eternal? Give me your pretty little mouth."

A translation simply shows the empty folly of the English language. That hot Spanish came out of me like molten metal out of a tilted crucible—in golden gobs; just the delirious repetition of that sentiment couched in the original and terminated by a dying fall in the music, the last word coming like a note plucked on a guitar. I tell you it will tie any girl of tropic tendencies hand and foot.

Incarnación was spellbound, her lips parted,

and a speculative gleam came in those eyes w
the lids dropped over them deep. In those see
ingly so simple words, dropped out with only h
an eye to consequences, as usual, I uttered t
cry of my lonely heart. In that moment I f
that I could resign myself to giving up my equi
in May, if any equity existed. Yes, May's beau
seemed cold and difficult by contrast—remo
unscalable, almost supercilious. My intrigui
fancy had struck into another vein and begun
play with the splendors of this dark beauty by n
side.

All this while it had been growing dark. We we
all muffled up in darkness there. The dance w
starting up again. I moved closer, put my a
about her waist, breathed the falling incense
that smoke fresh from her lips. I forgot t
sheriff; forgot everything but her eyes, her voi
the mere deep-throated music of it. I promis
to follow her into the Canyon of the Fools, t
more fool I, and her breath came more quickly
swear, at that declaration, and she drew back h
head archly. I was so tranced that she had to a
me twice the name of that man whose rib M
Gowdy had come out here to be, and who had fail
her.

"Oh, that man? Jim Harper," I said. "I
you know him?"

She shook her head, but I felt that a strar
change had come over her with the mention of tl
name and that she did know him perfectly. I h
got used to having the shadowy personality of tl
man cross my path in this bloodless fashion

this time, and I had curious hopes of never seeing him in the flesh, too. He was a myth, a legend. I looked into those eyes so close to mine to detect the truth, and I saw them widen, and her lips form a little dismayed circle.

It was in that position, precisely, *amigo*, that General Terrazas had discovered us. He had come from an unexpected quarter, from somewhere out back, where the joints of that great skeleton of a windmill were chattering. He came forward, a pompous, pock-marked little man, very plump, with splendid aspiring mustaches, and small pig's eyes glowering at me over an unshaven cheek. It's a wonder I wasn't poniarded.

"My house is yours," he hissed, satirically, and he laid his hand to his hip.

In the nick of time a long, ghastly looking man came up and whispered in his ear some powerful argument, and he desisted. He did claim his wife, though, and I thought best for the time being to relinquish her. But I caught a melting flash from the dark eyes of that indiscreet, unhappy woman as she was being led away, and I felt fortified in my resolve to snatch her from his bosom in some way as yet undesignated. As I was going away from there on the dark side of the house I collided with a man who seemed to be chuckling to himself over some good joke—a sinewy, black-headed young man. I recognized him for the driver of the stage, the jitney that plied between Madcap and the canyon.

"Are you hungering for trouble, *amigo?*" he inquired.

I reminded him murderously that he ran some risk of it himself by addressing himself to a total stranger with words like that on his lips. I couldn't upset his good nature, though.

"No offense," he said, smearing his tongue along a cigarette, "but you really ought to get a commission from the priest. The general will marry her again to-night."

"Marry her again?"

"Yes, certainly. They are going to quarrel now, and he will take the curse off by marrying her again. He has married her nine times already."

"Marriage with that woman would be nothing better than a slip hitch," I retorted, coolly, as if she meant nothing to me, and I walked away from him.

CHAPTER IX

I COULDN'T chuckle, somehow, then over the notion of that tenth marriage, although now I do see something humorous in a tenth try at the same knot that keeps coming undone. The question of a place to sleep came up again as I was creeping away through the dark. I couldn't go back to that boarding place of May's, that's plain enough, and my best course seemed to accept Tawgy's offer of his prairie schooner.

I went out there and looked in. He was sitting on the box containing his French saws and cleavers, reading a book, one of that set of classics with deckled edges which he had sacked about with him for three years now, spending his evenings in the illustrious and inexpensive company of the dead. Human nature is not so easily cheated, though. His idea was, of course, to put money in the bank. Well, in those three years, spent with such admirable patience among the enlightening shades of the ancients, Tawgy Clint, all unknown to himself, had slowly charged himself with a speculative tendency. This tendency, starting in the form of a resolution to let his head save his heels, as much as anything, had taken many forms. In general, it may be called protean. If old channels are blocked it will force new ones.

Clint's tendency, at the very moment when he was turning the corner into Easy Street, had exploded in the direction of gold mines. "One good investment beats a lifetime of toil." Was it possible that that magic sentence, a part of Swasey's literature, had overpersuaded him? Or was it simply that his adventurous heart tugged him on into these perilous fields? I can't say, but I do know that he saw fortune plain. He had lost most of his savings; but no matter, he was now on the point of recouping himself a hundredfold.

As soon as he saw me he put down his book and stroked his knees.

"Go it mild," he said. "Let me tell you right here and now, you are playing with fire when you tell that woman your troubles."

So—he had seen me with Inky, from afar.

"That woman? She is only a side issue with me," I answered, guardedly.

"A side issue with a side kick, then," Clint said. "I know her sort. I don't say keep away from women altogether, but I sincerely do believe in walking round these kiss-or-kill women when I come face to face with them. This is my reading hour. Pick yourself out a classic there."

He picked up his book again, and I pondered what he had said about that kiss-or-kill woman. That phrase fanned my cheeks like a breath of fire. It truly did. My brain swam with disjointed forebodings, and I wondered at myself and at the strange hold Inky had got on my imaginative faculty in that short time. First acquaintance with that woman was nothing short of an insidious

inoculation. The touch of her hand, the sulky animation of the eyes under those heavy fringes, seemed to breed a thousand fiery little fish-tailed devils in the blood stream, and soon enough they set on foot active torments that mounted to the brain, by George!—mounted hour by hour, and I could feel the progress of the disease and note the alterations in me, and still I couldn't or wouldn't do one mortal thing to check those ravages.

And that was my position at ten o'clock the next morning when I actually came to grips with Maricopa Jim. I'm ashamed to say I was wearing false hair on my chin at the time, and staring through Swasey's window with the vague hope of stealing a glimpse of May. Oh, remorse, remorse, remorse! If I had only had the courage to go in to her then and throw myself on her mercy and admit the superior capacity lodged there in that temperament of ice and fire. That was the time to have done it, and I wouldn't do it. The fool pride of a romantic held me back. If I couldn't present myself in the habit of a conqueror I wouldn't present myself at all. To come before her cringing, starving, after that snub she had given me, too, and confess that I wasn't resourceful enough to have tucked even one wild steak under my belt in all that time was what I wasn't man enough to do. Too much cave man in my system, I suppose.

Well, at all events, there I was, standing with my mouth open, gazing at that hatchet sticking in its lump of fairy quartz, and I grew certain that that sheriff had floated into position on the curb back of me. The situation called for desperate

remedies. It was time to throw the cloak at th bull, as the Spanish have it, and quick as a flash wheeled on him and asked him earnestly if h could tell me whether a party of the name of Jir Harper was in town, or had been seen in tow recently.

His attitude toward that simple question wa really extraordinary. He ignored it. He took m arm in a sinewy grip and inquired in mellow a cents which way I was making footprints and wh my business was in town. The same brace c damnably impertinent interrogations that Hor Face had fired at me at Haggett Junction, but th time they were put to me by a wilier questioner. scented that at once.

"You seem to be a stranger here," he said, an he teased out the ends of that sulphur-colore mustache thoughtfully.

"Well, I am," I said. "As a matter of fact, I an here representing some Eastern shareholders wh have properties down the canyon that want look ing into."

"Where are you stopping?" was his next que tion.

And I told him then a little cavalierly that I wa roughing it. I had always wanted to know what i was like to get down off this feather bed of civiliza tion, as somebody had called it, and see what i was like kicking against the pricks—no valet with in a thousand miles of me. My doctor had told m that frequent draughts of desert air—cell searcher —and higher altitudes would do me more goo than anything.

"Some people that have come out here looking for higher altitudes have found them," Maricopa said, and he raised his eyes piously. He was awfully jocular. "What was your last job? Where did you work before coming here?"

I told him it was against the law to ask a man in that state where he had worked before coming there. It was, too. His only answer was a nasty little laugh, and he reached out and took my beard in his hand and actually fondled it a second or so before wrenching it off. He gave me a thorny look then, and muttured: "You might as well hang that moss on your hip, my boy. Just follow me across the street, will you?"

By George! it began to seem that life out West was awfully hard in some respects, hardly different from that of a rat in a corner! I followed, of course, and he led me into that cement combination of a court and a jail which I had been seeing in dreams for some nights past. It was cool in there. There were a lot of dusty chairs capsized there, with oak writing arms, and a desk perched up on a high platform and crowned with the state statutes and an empty cigar box. To the right of this platform was a slatted steel door through which I could see a cell and an iron bed and a dirty red blanket draped over it. It was chill, and still I could feel the sun eating into my neck, too.

Maricopa sat down, all steel wire, and kept elevating and depressing his cigar while he was sizing me up. And then he pushed back his hat off that livid brow and told me to go on and talk for publication and be brief and truth loving.

Well, by that time I was ready to. I thought fast, and it seemed to me that I had better create an atmosphere of trusting and erring youth and throw myself on his mercy. I certainly did hang on that man's neck hard. I was candid as the devil, too. I told him how I had been going to Los Angeles to study medicine, all proper, when a conspiracy of chance had thrown May Gowdy into my care, as it were, and I had got sucked along in behind her as if she had created a vacuum. Nature might abhor it, but that was no reason why I should.

He nodded and slept over that, and ate some of the rags off his cigar, while a blue-bottle was buzzing round the window ledge and the yellow desert lay beyond. I owned up to having left the main line, abandoned my plans for the future, risked my fool neck trailing a woman who was as good as married already, and now had to all intents and purposes landed in the canary, I supposed.

I looked slant-eyed at him to catch his interpretation of these facts, and I saw that he was looking pretty grave. I got out my little diary and showed him in black and white where I had set it down that my associations with the lowest classes were self-directed, and that this was a temporary mode of living. He turned over the pages of the diary, cool and collected, moistened his thumb frequently, and pretty soon he threw out: "There is a good lot about Jim Harper in here. She came out here expecting to marry him, hey?"

I nodded.

"And then he wasn't here to meet her," Maricopa went on, slowly. "A very good reason, too. At this present moment he runs a good chance of getting drilled in the bean."

"Not Jim Harper?" I cried out.

And Maricopa said, "That same!"

I might as well confess that a little thrill of pure joy went through me at that intelligence. It's pathetic the way deep down I clung to May, and now my heart actually gave a teeny-weeny bound at the thought of that poor devil Harper's having been murdered, or being about to be murdered, and I had never seen him, either. For, don't you see, it opened up that delectable prospect of getting May safe out of this nasty mess by my own machinations—bear her out on my shoulders, if worse came to worst. I could see the two of us trekking across that leprous desert, bones on every hand, bones of buffalo and wild cow—human bones, too, for that matter—mirage of May's fainting spirit calling out to me that she could go no farther, the dark head sinking on my shoulder.

I gathered her in my arms and staggered on—to life and love; stumbled into it every time in those days. I never did underestimate my genius for succoring good-looking women, and my fatal amiability in that regard was heading me toward as sweet a little amorous *impasse* as ever a man walked into with his head down.

I came out of my abstraction enough to ask in a whisper, "Where is he?"

There I was, with my head away in the clouds before I was even sure that that cell door wasn't

going to clang on me in the course of the next te minutes. Clouds clustered round me as thick i those days as sponges on a Florida reef.

"As a matter of fact, I don't know," Maricop said. "But I do know he's in danger of being dor to death for what he knows."

"Does he know so awful much?"

I was taken aback a trifle to find that he w important enough to be brained for his knowledg

"What he does know would probably put Ge eral Terrazas behind the bars, to say nothing Mr. Robert Swasey," Maricopa said, in la accents.

Swasey! Terrazas! Terrazas behind the ba and Incarnación at liberty to apply for a divorc And May, my sweet, impulsive May, taking orde from that fox-faced criminal, Swasey.

"Is Swasey crooked?"

"Crooked, yes. Crooked as a street in China and just as slick as he is crooked. The point i now, since this recent decision closing up the True Friend, he is right down to hard pan."

"He's got an option on the Sprowl estate," I put in, eagerly, and I told him of Clint's offe to me in connection with that same.

"Exactly!" said the sheriff. "It won't sur prise you, perhaps, to hear that Terrazas is headed for the canyon, too—he and that good-looking wife of his," and he aimed one of his meaningfu eyeshots at me. I did have the grace to blush and the sheriff opened his hand, inspected th palm, shut it again thoughtfully, and said, "Yo have met the lady, as it happens."

"Yes, by chance."

"And she has told you, I suppose, that she is going down there to keep Terrazas's hotel in order—and take in washing. No? Well, that's how it is. There are two guests in the place now—Mr. Sebastian Polhill and his physician, or what you call him, Doctor Faggard."

"But I thought that Polhill and Swasey were at swords' points. Are they both friends of Terrazas?"

"Who knows?" Maricopa said.

He added that all those gentry had one common interest—gold—and that that would bring mortal enemies together for a time. Terrazas was scheming another revolution. To set the wheels going he must recapture that mine of his and suck it dry, because on its gold output alone depended the willingness of Terrazas's old soldiers to rally round his standard again. But such an undertaking would cost money itself. You have to catch a pump with gold when gold is what it pumps up.

"In my opinion," Maricopa said, "they have already laid their hands on gold, Swasey and Terrazas, and they are waiting for their chance to sneak over the border with it. They have got scattered through the canyon now a bunch of the general's old followers, good horsemen, good punchers, dead shots, too—not the kind of Mexican that files the sights off his gun when they catch in his clothing, understand. No, they are strong on gun fire and waiting for the chance. You see what that means, of course."

I did. It meant red war in that province; it meant another strain on the policy of watchful waiting. In the condition of the public patience, it meant, very likely, that the country would be precipitated into war.

"The hot-heads will get their way at last," Maricopa said, "and half a million good men will be condemned to do garrison duty in the mountain passes of Mexico for God knows how many years—to say nothing of the blood that will be spilled."

"Great crawling snails!" I burst out. "If that's the case, why not grab him now when you can put your finger on him?"

"What's the charge?" Maricopa answered, soberly.

"Can't you frame a charge?"

That was a well-nigh fatal question. The sheriff got up abruptly, clapped his hat back on his head, and strolled over to the door. He looked both ways, and came back and dropped over me with a fatherly light in those turquoise eyes of his. They looked weird, scintillating, smoky blue against the deep mahogany color of his lean cheeks.

"That is where you come in, my boy," he said, softly. "I have been watching your methods the last two or three days, and I have made up my mind you are the man I want. You have got plenty of punch; you seem to know when to make a stand and when to crawl backwards out of trouble. And then again, you do know how to humor women in the pinches, it's a cinch. You're the kind the dear things die for all around us."

I felt myself growing pale, and I advised him hoarsely to look elsewhere for his hired gunmen.

He patted me on the shoulder and told me not to jump to conclusions.

"I'm not asking you to do anything I wouldn't do myself if I had the right qualifications. There may be some little risk, of course," he added, with a twinkle, "but I take it you're not afraid of a red shirt. You don't mind getting your hide nicked in a good cause, hey?"

I kept the sparkle going in my eyes somehow, although that allusion to a red shirt was not the pleasantest thing in the world, you'll have to agree.

"What is your suggestion?" I breathed.

"Why, simply that you go on being interested in Terrazas's wife," he let fall, casually.

He poked a long cigar into my mouth, and I closed my teeth on it hard and looked straight ahead through the window at those burning yellow reaches. What more enticing proposition, you say, and it's true. I had bound myself to do that, anyway, with words of fire. But put in those bald words, it suddenly looked ominous—it looked tough. I had a hot flash, followed by impaired circulation in my extremities.

"You're one man that's not afraid to call a spade a spade," I murmured. "You're asking me to jab him in the jealous streak, I take it."

He acquiesced in that.

"His weak side. Why, even suppose he was to take a shot at you and miss!" Maricopa went on, dreamily. "Even at that, we could hold him for

attempt to kill. But as it is, we can't lay a finge on him."

Wasn't that enough to transmogrify a man, i all conscience?

"Suppose he didn't miss," I muttered, feebl and he said something about the plaudits of grateful country. The plaudits!

"They might fall on deaf ears," I interjected.

But still, do you know, there was a dizzy fas nation about that proposition, akin to that i pulse to fling yourself down from a great heig Here was something I ought not to do, take in the abstract—something perilous and sweet and suddenly it was put up to me to go throu with it as an act of Simon-pure patriotism; som thing I ought to do—no matter who or what must forsake to do it—and put my whole he into.

I was awfully tempted to try conclusions, ther no gainsaying that. I called up a hasty vision that seductive Spaniard. I lost myself in th unfathomed eyes. I remember thinking, "I oug not to hesitate," and I still think that way. stroke of international policy was involved, an if ever there could be a case where propriety went hand in hand with guilty love, this looked to be the case. Weren't the fates of two great nations hanging in the balance? Not to speak o Jim Harper's fate.

I reverted to May, and I saw that my bes chance to be of service to her and bring the ma of her choice into those waiting, yearning arm was to embrace this offer of Maricopa's. C

course, I don't deny that a baser motive was involved, too. I saw that if I did embrace it Maricopa would take care of me financially.

Here was my chance, and it looked like my only chance, to repay May what I owed her; my God-given opportunity to crop up in the role of her mysterious benefactor and carry everything before me. As usual, I pictured Jim as dying on the eve of his nuptials.

Maricopa had one last shot in his locker.

"Jim threatens to spill the whole game, and he is taken prisoner," he said. "All right, but he's still dangerous, and Swasey isn't the man to resort to killing. Well, what then? This girl comes to hand, and Swasey figures on using her as a lever to lever the concession of silence out of Jim by threatening dire consequences to May in case of a refusal."

You see, here was my chance to save May herself from worse than death, and it involved nothing on the surface more disagreeable than a flirtation with a young and pretty woman.

"Do you get the full beauty of all this?" Maricopa wanted to know.

I did, by fits and starts, and I was ready at the drop of a hat to burn up the road back to May Cowdy; but the sheriff put one of those lean paws on my arm and warned me not to go off half cocked. Hair-trigger tactics like that might result in the summary execution of poor Jim through motives of pure vengeance. Terrazas, in short, might scent a trap and bolt without waiting for the poison to work into his veins. The thing to do

was to ferry me down into the canyon in some natural fashion.

"You had better take that job Clint offers you on the Sprowl estate," he suggested. "Clint, of course, is an honest man. He is ignorant of Swasey's methods."

Another consideration hung me up. What was going to become of May? I couldn't leave her there in Swasey's keeping.

"Send her on ahead," Maricopa said. "Put her in charge of that Australian that runs the stage. He will drop her off at Sprowl's and make the necessary explanations. They will board her. They are at pretty low ebb, I happen to know, and need money."

"Send her on!" I repeated. "All words of one syllable, too. Don't forget that this girl has a mind of her own."

"Don't let her have a chance to use it, then," the sheriff said, in steely tones. "She'll do what's for the best, of course."

I suddenly felt myself subsiding, without any good reason, as if I had been borne up to that height of resolve by an invisible tidal wave which was passing now and letting me down with a rush.

"Suppose I refuse. Suppose I simply draw out now," I grated at him, slewing my cigar round in my teeth.

He turned a deprecating eye on that steel door, and I saw that in that remote contingency the law would have to take its course. A charge of vagrancy would be preferred against me.

Well, what was there for it, I ask you? Here

was the one job that had offered in that dead end, the one way to get money into my fist again, the one way to meet my obligation to May, the one way to bring back into the light of day the man she had come all those weary miles to meet and marry, and the one way to keep two great nations out of war—at a cost of only one red shirt, too. The situation had all the elements—doesn't it seem to you so?

And actually, from first to last, I couldn't believe I was going to get a red shirt out of it. Not even when, a little later—I had Maricopa's money stuffed in my jeans by that time, and a nickel star he had given me pinned to my undershirt—not even when I saw Terrazas standing in the middle of the road, looking at me with a dark light in his eye and the horns of his mustache well up.

Of course, I didn't hanker to pick a quarrel with him. I couldn't afford to get into some damaging fracas while May's fate hung in the balance, could I? It has to be confessed that I had made that compact with Maricopa with my fingers crossed, and I wish now that I had shown some of his engaging frankness.

I nodded worshipfully at Terrazas and walked past him in deep thought. I was in for it, you'll agree. But at its worst I couldn't help thinking that it had its captivating side. For one thing, I had got a weight off my chest in the knowledge that I had shaken for good and all that shadowy feeling of being idled after in the distance by interested parties.

It was a comforting thing to know that I had

Maricopa on my side, I say. He did perfect
enchant me. I liked that cool, sane way he h
of tackling problems of state. He didn't empl
phrases like, "We drinked together," or, "W
drawed our guns," or even like, "Which I do
think it will rain," as I had been led to expect
man of his caliber would; but still he was my id
of wild justice, and I felt certain from the train
way he had of easing his gun pocket over to ma
sitting down comfortable that he could shoot t
little glass ball to smithereens before it hit t
ground. Yes, I felt convinced that a few citize
like Maricopa Jim loafing around would ma
undertaking in that town a real profession a
not a mere side line to a furniture store.

I was concentrating hard on the immedi
future and the shape it was likely to take, an
didn't notice that I had walked through the to
and out on that cement bridge over the big wa
I was so deep in thought that I failed to hear th
rapid footsteps behind me. I heard nothing un
I felt this light impulse at my elbow, and then
wheeled round in a panic and there was May-
May herself, bless her!—standing there in her litt
blue-serge dress, with the silk-embroidered ka
garoo-pouch pockets, and the little hat with t
heckle feathers on it. She was flaming, too, b
she kept herself well in hand.

"It's all right," I began, hoarsely, and,
George! I was maudlin again! And I turned a
with a lump in my throat. "It's all right a
your not recognizing me, little girl, last n
I've got down pretty low, it's a fact, and I'

worth any decent girl's consideration any more. When you think of Bob McCarty, think of something in the past tense, will you?"

I certainly pitied myself. I heard her say, "You're slipping, Bobolink, you're slipping," but she stumbled over the words. I crept my eyes round to her again. She was fighting off that treacherous glimmer I had seen once before; that heart-swelling, surreptitious wetness along the lids that always raised me into the seventh heaven and the *n*th power.

"You will have me in tears, the best I can do, You poor mystifying kid!" she said. "Do you want to pull the heart out of me with just one grab? Can't you read between the lines? There I had told her I didn't know a soul in town! She's got Syd's own morality, and if I hadn't stood by that line of chatter, goodness knows, she might have put the whole boiling of us out of doors. Did you think I meant it?"

"It would have been all right if you had," I muttered.

She stooped toward me—she had got up on that cement wall with her hands about her ankles—and she said: "You mad, mad boy! If you will ride freights and come here on this wild-goose chase and starve yourself through just stubborn pride, do you think I will leave you to shift for yourself just for that? Why haven't you been near me? Don't you know I've been just about frantic about you, thinking what might have happened? Don't you know I feel responsible for you?"

Responsible for me! Could she have dropped out a word more humiliating than that to a man experimenting for the first time in calf heroics?

I said, huskily: "I've been busy with one thing and another. Look here! Just let me— I want to square up with you."

I took out my new-found roll and peeled off a leaf or two.

"Oh, that!" May said, flushing. "There's no hurry, really."

"And I want you to know that I appreciate—I don't know what I would have done—it was pure absent-mindedness and having that hang-dog on my trail."

"Isn't it the first duty of partners," May wanted to know, "to keep track of each other and let the one help that happens to be in the position to help? I thought that was the rule with partners."

"Are we partners?" I gasped.

"Well, aren't we for the time being?" she smiled.

She jumped down and took me by the arm and guided me out into a little mock canyon made by a fissure in some big rocks. I was speechless. The sun began to sink and pour in there and warm me, and then May asked me if I realized how badly in need of a shave I was.

"You look like a tramp," she said, playfully.

It's a fact; I hadn't had energy enough to shave myself in the last day or two, and I carried a full equipment in my back pocket, too—everything but a mirror, and May had that. She drew it out of that crocodile hide and held it there for me while I

shaved, plumped down there by that rill of water meandering through gray-green rocks. I got through with it, but the combination of hot sun, nerve concentration, and all those starvation hours was too much for me. The world began to go black in spots, and reel and whicker in front of me. I saw May's face, grave, concerned, and then frightened, just before I faded. Not quite, of course. I was never quite out, I always maintain, but it's not a convincing argument to May.

I came back slowly, edged into the world naïve as some little stranger, and when I learned that I was lying with my head in her lap and her soaked handkerchief across my brows I came to more slowly still. I got a lot of cheer out of that. I muttered that I was all right, nothing the matter but a little acute indigestion, probably—that was satirical—and I got a lot of cheer out of the general situation.

"Just lie still," May whispered. "Don't move. Don't exert yourself the least little bit. Poor boy, you're done in completely!"

I did as I was told. I felt loosened up inside, unjointed, disarticulated, and my legs and arms seemed to be twirled out three or four turns of the thread. It's a fact, with my head cushioned there I felt as if I had come to some exquisite anchorage and was riding there on a long swell, and I had to struggle to keep from bawling right out. I can only account for all that girlishness by saying that I had been going so short on food of late that I was in imminent danger of coming unglued altogether.

"I don't want you to think that I often play

the baby this way," I muttered. "First time in my life."

"Sh-h! Don't think about it!"

I couldn't think about anything else. Even a well-nourished man might feel a little dizzy with his head in the lap of a girl like that, and her cool fingers passing and repassing under his chin. Man! the tips were like velvet, and her eyes hovered over me with the strangest, shyest light of endearment in them imaginable.

"Is it really you?" I whispered.

And she said, "Of course it is, silly."

Strange, I couldn't seem to think that I was getting all these favors at the hands of one who was practically another man's wife all this while. It seemed to me that if she could only get definite news of Jim's demise everything would be jake. May would want to mourn a little while, as it was only natural she should, but time would soften the wound . . . and then would come the dawn of a happier day. . . .

I thought of a thousand ways of breaking the news to her that Swasey was a crook and that Jim was in his power, but May simply put her hand over my mouth when I tried to be serious.

"Favor yourself a little, do," she whispered.

Well, I was trying to. I lay back, and I had time for a whole flock of reflections and regrets. I had been too hasty in my promises. What I had agreed to do I had agreed to do in a moment of desperation, with the remembrance of May's snub fresh in my mind.

But that was all explained away now. Lying there, with May's hands caressing me, I recanted; I was bottleful of my original infatuation. I couldn't see any other woman in the world; nothing was too good for her, and there was nothing I wouldn't do for her, this side of actually dying, without knowing how she felt about me in her heart of hearts. I half closed my eyes, and I had a strange, delightful vision of the world falling in ruins around us, that jig-saw tower crashing to the ground, everybody snuffed out but just the preoccupied two of us, everything to do over, and nothing much to do with.

"Hello, Eve!" I whispered.

I held a yellow blossom under her chin to see if she loved butter. It tickled her. She shuddered and bent her head, and her chin pinioned my hand there without half trying. Strange how these details come to mind.

"You are getting stronger," she murmured.

You probably can't imagine how I could come fresh from that sinister conference with Maricopa and work this idyllic vein; but I could change moods in those days as easily as a scene shifter will shift scenery. I noted a brooding, beautiful upside-downness in that lovely face bending over me, and I was mysteriously heartened; but it's doubtful, of course, whether she herself was taking those giant leaps into the lavender hereafter along with me. A girl's mind doesn't seem to have the cruising radius of a man's, somehow. Had you noticed that? May hadn't an inkling of what was going on inside me, and it would probably have

knocked her cold if she could have known—at the time.

When from sheer joy of living I gave my imitation of an Englishman in distress, she said: "You mustn't, really! It makes me feel as if I had a strange man's head in my lap. Bobolink, do you want me to think you are fully recovered?"

We were domestic. I subsided, promised to be good, lay back again in a kind of lazy swoon, and formulated easy ways of getting out of my contract with Maricopa. Contemporaneously, I couldn't help noting May's little graces and touches that weren't obvious at a far view, like that little square collar of filet crochet, the fleck of powder on her neck, the clean smell of just a dab more of it somewhere, and the sway and twinkle of that little *lavallière* she wore slung round her neck on a chain of refined gold. She was still waiting for that necklace of raw nuggets.

She was deft. I felt certain pricklings in my throat, heart-swarmings, when she dovetailed her long fingers under my chin with a gentle massaging motion and murmured mischievously that a cheek as smooth as mine must be a delight.

"A delight!" I gasped.

"Well, from a barber's point of view," she added.

She had been friendly with a lady barber at one time, I ascertained. Had even—*mehercule*—at one time thought of taking up barbering, and had gone through some of the literature of the subject with a view to finding out whether red beards were stiffer than black, and kindred topics. She pitched me that old yarn about the ship's barber who al-

ways cut people when he shaved them ashore because he allowed for the motion of the ship, and my guffaw hadn't subsided when she was running on again, quoting her lady friend to the effect that what was truly abominated in the profession was where a man's face had fallen into hills and valleys.

"If I were to take it up I imagine I had rather shave three young men than one old one," she suggested, delightfully, and I believed her.

"Dog-gone if I wouldn't like to see you in the role of Delilah!" I chuckled. "Maybe you are. I feel as weak as water, as it is."

I did, too. I wasn't able even for a long while to lift my head out of her lap, and I lay there for a season, listening to the drip of water in a pool somewhere, and feeling the sun warm on my ankles.

May said, absently: "You have two crowns to your head, do you know that? Do you know what that means?"

I grunted out a negative.

"It means that you will eat your bread in two kingdoms."

I was silent, not knowing what line to take, and she went on, composedly: "Men have all the luck, don't they? A lot of girls would give anything for that dimple of yours, Bobolink McCarty."

I wasn't used to having my personal beauty brought into the conversation. At that time I didn't know that girl's trick of dwelling on a man's features and delighting in them one by one. She had reference to the dimple in my chin, I might

as well say. I had always been afraid that it was a sign of degeneracy, but May admired it.

"It can be yours for the asking," I said, idly.

And then without the least warning she dropped out ever so lightly, "Is that what you told that dark girl, I wonder, that you were dancing with at the pavilion?"

I sat up broad awake, and I saw what she had meant by saying I would eat my bread in two kingdoms. And wasn't it like May to introduce that momentous topic in just a casual word or two? It was accomplished in a breath, and it took me down ever so many pegs. So she had herself passed by and seen me rampant in the arms of that impassioned Spanish housewife! All the world had seen me!

Yes, but what she didn't know, what she couldn't have known, was the nature of the deadly barb, pointed with irony, that had prodded me in there. How could she feel otherwise than hurt, seeing only the superficial aspect of the thing?

I ought to have let her into the plot then and there. I know that now, and yet I didn't do it. Why not? Well, for one thing, I was burning mad to get her shipped out there where nobody except Jim Harper would have a better right to look after her than I had, and maybe he was already murdered. All I wanted was to wrap May round three or four times with those long, gawky arms of mine and tell her she need never look to anyone but me for her protection, and I was afraid she wouldn't see it my way if she knew how I stood committed toward Incarnación.

n any case, I didn't tell her the one thing that ıld have made all clear. I did think of a usand tight-fitting reasons that might palliate t offense against good taste, if nothing more, May wasn't asking for reasons. She was simply ting me in possession of her state of mind, and lt as if she had thrown and gagged me.

That? Oh, that was the wife of General razas," I murmured.

lay's light burst of mocking laughter was lence to me that she didn't care whose wife y was. I couldn't accuse her of jealousy, of se, and I didn't accuse her; but she did convict of a vagabonding fancy with one searching look.

I was trying—I wanted to get a line on the ral," I said, and I was conscious of an accelera- of the pulse. "You know, I am going down e into some gold fields adjoining him, and I ted to find out where he stood."

here was quite a long silence; then something, sigh, half yawn, from May. I read a dozen rent meanings into that single small sound, she said nothing, and I ultimately rolled over one elbow and looked into her eyes. I saw ething like dismay, something like terror e.

You're leaving here?" she faltered.

I've formed a partnership to hunt for gold," id, simply.

And you are leaving right away, Bobolink?" put my hand on hers hard and said, in a tense sper: "Do you think I don't know what we've h been thinking of all this time? He wasn't

here. He abandoned you, left you here on the threshold of the desert without a word, without a syllable. Isn't it the truth?"

"You mustn't misjudge him," May countered, rapidly. "It's true he isn't here, but he did leave a note for me in Mr. Swasey's hands."

"A note!" I said, bitterly. "You come two thousand miles, and there's a slip of paper waiting for you. Is that your conception of the manly thing to do? Didn't you have a right to expect a little more than that, in just common decency?"

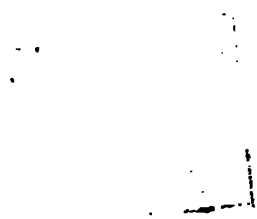
The storm petrel was abroad in those clouded eyes. I had been on the point of asking what was in the note, in my capacity of lord protector and champion of married and nearly married women; but, after all, I didn't. I pitched my next remarks in a new key altogether. I begged her pardon for my insinuations. I said that Jim undoubtedly knew his own business best, and that only some extraordinary emergency, explained in his note, could have detained him from her arms.

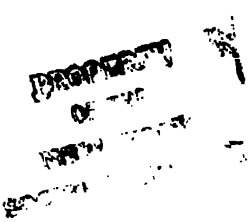
"In fact," I said, "I have just a whisper of info to the effect that he is being held somewhere for his knowledge. So much you may know yourself; but I wonder if you know that Swasey, his employer, is implicated."

"Swasey!" she breathed.

That dark, lovely head was close to mine, the blue eyes horror-struck. It was evident that all my stuff was new to her. She confessed to me that that man gave her the creeps and that he had told her to make herself ready in the morning

I PUT MY HAND ON HERS HARD AND SAID, IN A TENSE WHISPER: "DO YOU THINK I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT WE'VE BOTH BEEN THINKING OF ALL THIS TIME?"





for a long journey into the mountains, where Jim would be waiting for her.

"I didn't trust him," she whispered, "but what to do I didn't know."

"Then come with me," I said, all in a rush.

Jove! Youth is a wonderful time, isn't it? There's nothing like its recuperative power. May and I fanned it all out together. I said nothing of my having taken service under Maricopa, but I did say on his authority that Swasey was a broken reed, if not, indeed, a fading flower, and that, in short, he meditated something vile; and she believed me and agreed to go down to the Sprowls's under my protection.

"Oh, Bobolink," she said, "when I found Jim wasn't here and that all your worst fears were verified, didn't I thank my lucky stars you were in the neighborhood! Not that you'll ever have to complain that I'm the clinging-vine type; but don't you find, yourself, that the farther away from home you are the more little things will upset you?"

She gave me a grateful look, and a warm wave picked me up and carried me along on its crest. I was fairly quaking to think that she had yielded to my judgment. With all her sane woman's self-possession, in this crisis she had leaned on me and taken my interpretation of the facts for gospel. I couldn't forget that, not even in the dark days to come.

"You will probably never know how close you came to being spirited away by that man Swasey," I said. And her only reply was: "I'm pretty

substantial. It would take the right man to spiri me away."

She was right on her toes by then, and stretche out those fair arms of hers impulsively to th winds, to the desert. The right man!

She gave me a brave, steady look and said ther was one last subject that would have to come u for consideration—finances. Her money had com to an end. I answered in a deep voice that tha was all right. I could negotiate the eats for twc I was gruff.

She just gave out a little smothered sound an threw her arms square around me and whispered "Why, you perfect peach! Did you think would refuse your help? I haven't a spark c your ridiculous pride."

Her cheek was hard into mine for just tha sisterly second. All her releases were like that— out of a clear sky, catapultic—and if at times w seem inordinately intimate you have to remembe that the circumstances of our acquaintancesh had all been novel and special. We had seen eac other under different lights and in times of stres and I don't doubt either could have painted full-length portrait of the other by this time. I may look to you as if May was the aggressor i some of these passages, and yet I swear she neve made a move or lisped a syllable that wasn't the quintessence of sweet, impulsive young-woman-hood. As far as lugging in the love stuff goes, she never thought of me in that way—never. Why, at the very last, when I was telling her where and when to board that Australian's stag

and giving her the money to do it with—I paid her back in her own coin, for once—she said, shyly, "If worse comes to worst, I can start an agency out here, and I'll bet I could build up a business, too," just the way one partner will make a suggestion to another when both are on the bones.

That doesn't sound like the speech of an enamored girl, does it?

CHAPTER X

OLD King Knute gave a hearty yodel when I told him I was with him. "We'll drop down on a body of ore like a hawk on a chicken," he assured me.

He expected to get orders to move any time now, because if the assessment work wasn't done on this Sprowl estate there was nothing to prevent claim jumpers from jumping some of those million-dollar claims. He gave me a lecture in geology and a dollar to get food and strength, and off I went. I didn't mention my arrangement with Maricopa, of course, and I said nothing of my suspicions of Swasey.

I felt myself filling out like a toy balloon. Had I thought that town was hostile? It fairly snuggled up against me, man. I sauntered into a bar and had an oyster cocktail, and out again with a cigar in my teeth and oceans of confidence in my stride.

And right then who should I see coming down a little laneway but Sydney Hecker! Poor old Syd! I had completely forgotten him in the rush of new events. He looked pale as ashes, too—all cramped over—and I didn't need to be told to know that he had failed to get that indoor job he had been angling for. He hadn't turned

up even the ghost of a job, it transpired, and he looked apologetic, sheepish.

"How's tricks?" I said.

He moistened his lips and told me he was a sick man, shattered, suffering from some sort of nervous affliction. And to make matters worse, there wasn't a soul anywhere within two thousand miles who would turn a hair or even drop a tear if Syd was to drop down in his tracks and never move again. In point of fact, I could follow that psychology of his in the dark because I had been a victim of it myself, but I wouldn't let him think so.

"It will all be the same a hundred years from now," I said, to comfort him.

"Can't you help me?" he whimpered. "All I ask is three squares and a roof over my head and a chance to earn an honest dollar."

"How about a mattress for the thigh bones?" I jeered.

He pleaded with me not to joke, and, in fact, the total absence of three squares is no joking matter. Syd was beginning to see elements of vitality in the perfunctory business of coming in and drawing up a chair three times a day. There are odd corners here and there about the planet where anything like that takes doing, and he had settled into one of them. But still I could see his morality standing up there stark, like a chimney out of the ruin of a good house.

I certainly felt picaresquish, looming over him there, with prosperity lining those clouds of smoke

I sent tumbling in his direction. He never once asked how it had fared with me, either. I suppose he took it for granted that I had held up the stage. I narrowed my eyes and chewed the end of that cigar and asked him how he would like to come with me on a little gold-digging party. I felt man size all through this conversation.

Syd hesitated and said, "Is it legal?" in a husky whisper.

He was goggle-eyed. You see? He was afraid of associating himself with a cutthroat like me, and I actually felt complimented by those fears of his, too. I told him contemptuously that it was legal as breathing. Think of it, though! Think of a man on the brink of starvation hanging back from food and raiment out of consideration for the law, taken in the abstract!

"Don't jump at this," I said. "Take plenty of time to consider. But remember that one good investment beats a lifetime of toil."

"I know where you filched that sentiment," Syd said, morosely, "and I don't mind telling you that it's vicious through and through."

"Vicious? Yes, that may all be; but still it has a pleasant ring, hey? Put it another way and say that one stroke of the pick may mean a lifetime of the ladies. Put it any way you want to. I'm not sure you can have the job, anyway. I'll have to see my partner first. He is particular who he hooks up with, and you can't blame him in a country like this, where there's a centipede under every other pebble."

Syd said in a dragged-out voice: "I wish you

would ask him, please. I suppose beggars can't be choosers."

"Which side of the house do you get that rosy way of looking at things from?" I asked him. "Anyway, come and eat something."

When I left him there pitching into a T-bone at the Jap restaurant I went away all in a glow over those coals of fire I had left heaped up on his head. I told Tawgy that I had found him a good man at a dollar a day and found.

"He's reliable, is he?" Clint inquired.

Syd, I said, was afraid of retribution in so many forms that it wasn't likely he would try to pull anything crude. Tawgy replied that the mere fact that he was a friend of mine was recommendation enough. Lucky thing for him he didn't know about the degeneracy implied in that dimple of mine—what?

I haven't said much as yet about the Canyon of the Fools, but I suppose you can see from the very start of this yarn that that would be the place I would fetch up in ultimately. *La Cañada de los Tontos.* Who were the fools and what was their folly? History doesn't say, but those old passions had burned out long before May and I laid eyes on the scenes of their enactment. The canyon remained, though, winding sluggishly among the interlacing spurs of foothills, and having its source at the summit of the great mountain itself. Triangle Mountain, it was called, on our map of that country. At its apex the stone had worn into a mighty descending series of pipes or

columns, and was called the Organ. At times, they told us, when the wind was running in the canyon, the Organ seemed to mutter certain deep tones of a natural symphony, a kind of devil's music in the ears of those men toiling there. They were visionaries, those fellows. In each heart was a vision of a glowing marriage with the jade Fortune, dragged on her knees there before that stone altar in the shadow of the Organ. Yes, sir, it only wanted one shattering stroke of the pick to give men back the singing hills of the Psalmist.

And because they anticipated that moment they dreamed gigantic dreams of millions of dollars, they dreamed of sacks of free gold and deep-seated lodes of copper. These glory holes were lying there in nature's everlasting strong box. And at bottom they never forgot that they were rivals for the hand of Fortune, either. They harbored suspicion against one another. They were always seeking some verification of the rumors of treachery that were continually running between the gray walls of the canyon. They were poor men, nearly all of them. Chance had brought them here, and, by the powers! the seductions of chance held them chained here. They had come, bringing wives, many of them. Some of these wives had died, some had deserted. They usually went away with men whose interest in gold was restricted to the minted sort. Some had stayed, and these had become terrible shrews. But can you wonder at that? The wilderness, which makes seers of men, makes overseers of their wives.

They all had enormous claims, it may be said. Following the custom, they had erected cairns, monuments, to show where these claims began and where they ended. They nailed tomato cans bottom up to poles, and into these cans they thrust scraps of paper, which in the course of years grew crisp and yellow, and these scraps contained detailed descriptions of claims:

Commencing at a young black-oak tree 400 feet northerly of an old cross cut, or drift, in the ravine, thence southeasterly 1,500 feet to a black oak on the north side of Turnback Creek and having this notice in duplicate—

That sort of thing. The young black oak would grow up and grow old and wizened and queer the description before those tenacious beings would abandon the hope that had charmed and chained them there. The claims were made big to avoid the chance that some bet might have been overlooked. These were patents, and it is in the nature of a patent to claim everything in sight. In a fine net all fish are caught, and you can always throw back the little ones.

But, don't you see, the very extensiveness of these claims operated against the claimants. To hold them they were forced to work them, and nine times out of ten they bit off more than they could chew. They put a dozen or a score or a hundred profitless holes in the ground so as to make sure of extracting ore from the one-hundred-and-first hole. Because, thank fortune, there was always the moral certainty that in

the next hole, or the next but one, surely, they would stumble into gold—a pocket, a seam, a kidney, a glory hole—lying there in such awful profusion that a man might shovel a fortune into sacks between dawn and dark. Yes, sir, shovel it in like so much powdered sugar, as old Dan Sprowl had done on that historic occasion which had brought wealth and the secret germ of fatal ruin with it at one and the same time.

Every night they would sit there with that hot desert wind fanning their ears, and call to mind men, situated like themselves, who had dropped down on a body of ore with one shot—half a million, a million, ten millions. Doesn't it seem as if the imagination warms and expands as that word "million" is repeated?

Other men had done it. There you were! Sometimes in a moment of utter discouragement, sometimes with their last shot, with their last stick of dynamite they had blown down the breast of a drift, and, creeping in, found themselves in a glittering chamber of jagged gold.

With the last shot! The stimulation of that thought is immense and undying. I know, because I have felt it myself, by Jupiter! I have felt it galvanize my weary body into renewed life at times when I have been ready to pitch forward on my face with the next step. There is a cord that stretches ever tighter in your heart that vibrates to that suggestion only—the Midas touch.

I remember having an intimation of riches in the very core of my being on that late afternoon

hen we first drew near the Sprowl estate. The orld was darkening. A filmy vapor seemed to teal out of the baked earth, but still the great nountain on our left stood in a sharp and clear ight. The Organ itself was half buried in massy ilver clouds, bearing a dazzling sheen on their nder parts. From somewhere high up at the lower edge of that black belt of pines I caught a fierce silver flash from a roof of corrugated iron.

Yim, the burro, plodded ahead of us in a dry wash, a winding river of sand, and a wise expression was depicted on his benign countenance. He certainly recognized the fatuity of human endeavor, without in any way being able to put a stop to it. A symbol of all the sorrowful oppression in this world, he was so constituted that he would never give voice to it.

In places the spiny flanks of these foothills were torn, as if gored by some wild bull. I saw where huge holes had been bored into them, and these holes stared like eye sockets in a skull.

"That looks like galena ore," Clint whispered to me once.

We left Syd standing by Yim and walked into one of those lateral tunnels, a rugged, much-dynamited arch of stone. As soon as Clint touched a match to a twist of paper he had in his pocket a tribe of long-legged, translucent spiders began to crawl in every direction. Clint never saw them. He had eyes for nothing but the rock itself, and I could see spurs of malignant silver light struck from that. Old King Knute's eyes bulged in his head. He picked at the sides of the tunnel with his

nails, and suddenly dropped the improvised torch with an oath. He had forgotten its existence until the flame reached his fingers.

I heard his rapturous disembodied voice murmuring: "Beautiful! Beautiful!" close in my ear, and I felt perspiration rilling down my back. We groped our way out. Sydney was mooning there, stroking the burro. Yim's ears were pointed forward, his tail hung inert, and he supported without a quiver, without question, and without eagerness all those boxes Clint had piled on top of him.

And, do you know, I felt actually sorry for that animal because it couldn't in the slightest degree partake of my transport. It knew nothing of the hope that was a living flame in my bosom, and by that time I really was in a yellow delirium, I assure you. I could only agree with Clint that it was a glorious thing to be a man, subject to such radiant hopes.

My partner stroked the ears of the burro with those ecstatic finger ends of his, and whispered, "We are rich men, Yim," and poked it with a little green stick he was carrying. And Yim wasn't put out of his stride one jot by that intelligence. He applied himself single-mindedly as before to picking up and setting down his hoofs. They fell in the wash one after another in a comic rhythm which suggested mute application to a mysterious task by a serious and noble-minded captive.

Wonderful, wonderful to be swinging along like that, in the full glow of health, fortune all but in your grasp, luck in your very marrow, and the one

woman in the world drawing nearer all the time! With every step I felt a delicious flaming impatience in my heels. I called up May's face out of some lustrous nowhere, and I scorned the lassitude of my imagination because it couldn't paint those charming lineaments in all their glorious detail on the inside of my eyelids. I knew well enough that I should give a start of surprise that she should be so beautiful, so unexpected, when we met again. I had a thousand and one questions I wanted to ask her, too. I forged on, devising subtle ways for her to put me to the proof, and Maricopa was no more than a midge on the horizon, the cloud no bigger than a man's hand. I felt that I had escaped the clutch of that infernal bargain simply by burying myself here in the desert.

I can catch that scene now by just closing my eyes; those empty reaches, and those remote hills like the heaving of a distant ocean colored by sunset. The atmosphere was lucid, too, and the edge of the water tank above the Pandora claim gave out a lingering shaft of violet light such as might have been struck from the girdle of a diamond of the first water.

"There's the joint," Clint whispered. "That's Polhill's claim. I would give a good deal to know what's at the bottom of it. Does it look to you as if they were working it?"

It didn't. It looked the picture of abandonment, I'm bound to say. Cows were drifting down to drink there. Those red and black hides were sleek and clearly defined against the masses of shale and quartz. I could see the sun sparkling

on the polished horns of a black bull which was standing still and letting those sulky young steers with their sneering noses idle past him.

These details come before me now because they were etched into my brain by being contemporaneous with my first glimpse of Incarnación in that canyon. She was standing in the doorway to that ruin of a miners' hotel, the Empire. I looked everywhere except into the eyes of that Spanish siren, as we drew near, and I had to look there, too, finally, of course. It seemed to me that I saw welcome, hope, vivid equivocal lights streaming from those brilliant eyes under their beautifully penciled eyebrows. Her hair, flaring out around those olive cheeks, gave her a wolfish, wild, blooded look, too, that was attractive and different, somehow, and I thought right away of that dictum of Meredith's that woman will be the last thing civilized by man.

I believed him, and I understood better, after that mysterious inciting eye clash, what the books mean by calling certain women splendid animals. I don't make any bones of saying that Incarnación Terrazas was a splendid animal. Yes, be her faults and virtues what they may, she certainly was well compacted.

I know I was deeply affected by the striking picture she made standing in that doorway. I was even inclined to overhaul the terms of that contract again. I wasn't so plaguey sure I wanted to abandon it, and when I turned away that picture wabbled on my retina just as the image of the sun will when you have glared at it too long.

I took in good part that compromising flash from those black eyes, it may be stated, but I didn't return it. Time enough to be getting forward with what was expected of me in that quarter. We didn't exchange a syllable, and yet surely there was a voiceless understanding in the air, a streaming tentacle, a silver bond tenuous as the spider's thread, and yet strong as death. The wall back of her was split and faulted, and rising beyond it was the solid blue cheek of the big mountain itself. I suppose the elevation and the high visibility of that strangely figured crown may have tended to raise and exalt the mind, as if a glimpse had been got into a distant kingdom, never to be trod by mortals. And, by Jove! for one melting, soaring moment I fancied myself seated on a throne there, impregnable and immortal, with that supple Spanish jade by my side! And May not a biscuit's toss away, too. What a rogue I was in those days where women were concerned! Like individual notes in some sweet symphony, they seemed to gather half their meaning from those that came before and those that followed after.

"Where have I seen that woman in the past?" Syd muttered.

I hazarded a guess that it had been in his dreams of the ideal, but he shook his head solemnly.

"She's too much woman altogether," he asseverated, and later—oh, a good deal later—I remembered that in Sydney's favor. Yes, he had struck the nail on the head that time, and he was due to. Even a stopped clock is right twice a day.

At the time, though, I scarcely heard him. I

walked on in a dream, and didn't come to myself until we were within easy hail of the Sprowl compound. Then, when I felt a nervous grip on my elbow, I wheeled round in a panic. I thought, as much as could be, it was Maricopa insinuating that the time had come for me to go on with my part of that unnatural contract. I certainly felt as if I had sold myself to the devil, and I don't doubt I showed it in my face.

It was only Syd, in point of fact. He said in agonized tones, "Why didn't you tell me that she was to be here?" and pointed through the wires of the compound at May, who was revealed taking a playful lesson from that lean Australian in the art of throwing a lariat.

"Would it have made any difference in your coming or not coming?" I inquired.

He groaned out: "How can you ask? I want nothing better than to flee her now. You have known all along that she was here, haven't you? I believe you have inveigled her down here for purposes of your own. I have felt from the start that there was something fishy in this business."

I put on a knowing leer and simply inquired of him, "How did you Sherlock that?"

I seemed to be always showing my worst side to Sydney, and there was a fatality in that, too, as it turned out.

CHAPTER XI

BLACK Dan Sprowl's history was in this wise: Four years before he had come into the Canyon of the Fools singing psalms in a lion's voice, and the canyon had laid hold of him and stripped him to beggary, reducing him until he could count all his bones, in the words of the Psalmist. But he was no longer singing psalms.

The canyon understood its fools, it has to be conceded; and so old Dan had opened out, right in the beginning, a pocket of astounding richness lodged in the stone skirts of the Golden Girl—a hundred thousand in a day.

But this smile of fortune was brief as it was dazzling. They had broken into that glory hole at a distance of only twenty feet from the surface of the ground, and it was literally a pocket, as the term implies. They rifled it and it was empty. The walls of which it was composed were smooth; smooth as the palm of your hand, old Sprowl said, and not one grain of gold to be seen on them anywhere.

They went crazy mad and ripped the pocket all to pieces. They bored, drilled, drifted, blasted like madmen. They went above the pocket and sank a deep shaft down to it, and they went below and drove in a tunnel laterally, hoping against hope to pick up that broken vein again.

All no good. Nature had forgotten to leave her latch string out. The broken end was no thicker through than a man's little finger, maybe, but it might have slid half a mile or ten miles. It might have gone clean under the mountain, snapped off short by some faulting of the earth, as the Fates snip off threads of destiny.

But old Dan could never forget that it was there. His feeling was like the maternal instinct of the mother for her lost child. Furthermore, it wasn't lost. It was there! Somewhere imbedded in unbetraying country rock that vein lay waiting to be bled. His own eye had probably rested a thousand times on the very spot—the very spot.

Torments of Tantalus, where was that spot? He could never be satisfied till he had found it. So he planted his hundred thousand in the ground again, according to the usual mining formula of making five talents grow where ten were before, and none where five were. He established a huge mining camp, killed and roasted two beeves a week, and fed them to two shifts of miners under the foremanship of Terrazas. By Mars! he was going to eclipse Cripple Creek! He would stride back and forth there and dispatch whole mountains with one sweep of his fist. Those captivating hills billowed around him like a sea of gold.

"I'll ventilate 'em!" he roared.

He was entirely wrapped up in that vision of clustering millions, and the prospect of more gold crowded out the walls of his heart. The force of these expanding visions is destructive, you may

well believe. He put all he had back into the ground, all he had dug up, and all he had saved out of a hard life at sea, too. And even then, when he was simply hanging on by the skin of his teeth, beggared and broken, he felt richer than ever before in his life. It was there!

The estate began to look like a warrior ant drift, a decayed rabbit warren. It held as many as a hundred holes, shafts, tunnels, borings. The shafts were full of water and the tunnels were crawling with centipedes and white spiders.

The lust for gold had now become, in his own phrase, his rock, his chain, and his vulture. He could never make his mind up to tear himself away at a given time, haunted as he was by the harrowing conviction that somewhere at his feet lay buried that elusive profusion of free gold.

Ultimately his widowed daughter, Mrs. Blendon—she that was Azalea Sprowl—took a dislike to Terrazas and whispered in Dan's ear that the general had struck gold and was simply carrying it off under cover of night. Old Sprowl was tortured. A leak! He felt as if the heart's blood was running out of him.

He turned Terrazas out of camp, but he was nearly at the end of his rope by then. Not a grain of gold left in the bank—none of those tumblerfuls so glibly alluded to by Clint—food running low and the claims themselves in danger of being jumped by men who had said all along that old Sprowl hadn't dug in the right places. There wasn't dynamite enough left to do the as-

sessment work, and only one miner still l faithful to him—Juan by name.

That was the time that Swasey chose to the old fellow. He listened to what governn experts and others had said about the Canyo the Fools. He listened to Sprowl's tremu eulogy of the Golden Girl. I can imagine the seaman speaking of her with tears in his e and in the voice of a lover not to be disillusio even by the proved faithlessness of his belo and finally Swasey advanced the opinion what was needed was development.

Old Sprowl was sure of it. He actually belie that there was some quality in the soil th abouts that only needed breathing on by the breath of capital to spring up in golden flow Just let a few of these monetary geese be in duced here once, to wander at will, and he w answer for the golden eggs.

Development! The magic of that word induced the old seaman to sign half the es away and give Swasey, in addition, an optio bond the whole of it at his pleasure. Mount dashed out of his fist by the scratch of a pen; yet, as Swasey said, blithely, the Mississippi flowed unvexed to the sea.

Clint, of course, was the man sent by Sw in the interests of development. The momen laid eyes on that compound he whispered to that things were at sixes and sevens around t diggings, if he knew anything at all. The were dead, the chickens were mangy, and stovepipe had got over at a slant. Beyond

kitchen were three or four tents, one of which had been set apart for May, and beyond these again was a square wooden chamber, pine sheathed, where the two sisters slept.

The whole thing looked desolate. A weeping willow at the gate would have been a harmonious touch, and I didn't need to hear Azalea's high-pitched, recriminating voice to know that not everybody's temper had stood the strain well. She looked upon us as intruders, as criminally minded men who had slunk out here into this God-forsaken hole with the intention of preying on the remnant of a property belonging to a poor weak woman. She and Clint were at swords' points in no time. She said frankly that his coming here was one more in that series of foxy moves by which Swasey intended in the end to swallow them whole.

That very first night she said, "So this is the new fortune hunter!" as soon as she laid eyes on him; and Tawgy confessed to me that he felt as weak as water then, as much so as if she had leveled a finger at him at a moment when in his heart of hearts he meditated vile treason.

It wasn't long before she was using "fortune hunter" in a new sense, too, and insinuating that Clint was casting sheep's eyes at Aurelia Sprowl, her sister, and that he meant to marry her and get a strangle hold on the estate that way—hog the whole and leave Azalea to come in on a chimney-corner basis.

Can you imagine it? The one hope for that dying venture lay in Clint's energy, and she knew

it, and still she wouldn't trust him. Black Dan himself didn't, wholly—none of them except Aurelia, and Aurelia was favorably impressed from the beginning. When Clint was being badgered by the boring looks of the old seaman and the hectoring of his elder daughter, that lucky Swede fell into the way of darting a supplicating look at Aurelia, and I could swear that she returned it. Well, why shouldn't she? Wasn't anything due her for the years she had been chained there like Andromeda to the rock—the precious years of her youth like drops falling one by one out of the perfumed vial of her beauty? I formulated that thought one night for May, and she agreed, with a catch in her voice.

"Isn't she beautiful?" she whispered.

We were sitting at the time outside her tent, and glimpsing Aurelia from time to time as she appeared in the door of the kitchen shack. May was the least self-conscious thing in all this world, and I don't think she ever gave her own beauty a thought. I wonder if she even knew how beautiful she was.

It's a fact, though, that bronze-haired Sprowl beauty, with those beautiful fat shoulders and those massive bronzed arms, would have had any artist groping for the camel's hair. She was bronzed every way by those hot suns, but her original underlying fairness I could just glimpse or surmise in the pallid sheen of the underarm when she raised it to set the lamp in its bracket. She must have had a complexion like milk.

I felt convinced that four years spent in that

chasm—the best years of her life thrown away there—had not made an optimist of her; but if she was sorry for herself she didn't show it. There wasn't a drop of bitterness in her soul, and her wonderful love for that old seaman, her father, was something you can't put into words.

"You should have seen him before this awful obsession got hold of him," she told us. "He was another man altogether. I think now he has forgotten how to laugh, since mother died, and can only sit there in the sunshine staring at nothing. It breaks my heart, but nothing will wake him out of it but the thought of finding ore. Ore! Wouldn't you think," she cried, raising her voice a little, "that the sight of that specter out there would have sickened him of it? But, no, the more reverses he had come upon him the more certain he was that everything would come back to him in good time. 'It's like the tides,' he says. 'The lower they go the higher they will come back,' and such words as that have been fatal to us all."

She knew the mockery of having hope planted in your breast like that flower of the gods that never withers. The specter she referred to was none other than Mr. Sebastian Polhill, who had come into camp in company with Doctor Faggard, his manager. Faggard I recognized as that ghostly-looking man who had plucked Terrazas back from dagger play there on that blue veranda. Gad! I can't mention it now but the clank of that artesian well is in my ears again and the vision of a dark, rebellious head tilted toward me, with that

shadowy look in the eyes of those that sin and suffer for it.

Faggard called himself a physician, and whenever he came he was closeted with Mrs. Blendon to hear the catalogue of her ailments, leaving his chief, Polhill, sunk down on a box outside with his back to the wall. He didn't move. What was there to move for? His face had been blasted beyond recognition, and the whole head was nothing but a mass of bandages, out of which two dark-blue lenses stared, vacuous and malignant, like the eye sockets of a skull. There was no way to approach that miserable being, no chance to slip a whisper of encouragement into that deaf ear, no chance that he would ever voice his wretchedness, either, because it was bruited about that his tongue had been torn out by the roots. That was the penalty he had paid for seeking and acquiring the Midas touch.

He was known up and down the canyon by that death's head. He was known at any part of that desert, and people halted and were dumb at sight of him, the one truly successful man in those parts. Yes, he was rich; nobody knew how rich. Those deep sulphates and tellurides in the Black Prince had yielded marvelously rich ore year after year, and showed no signs of exhausting themselves yet.

I was staring at him still when Faggard came out of Mrs. Blendon's chamber and picked me out of the numerous objects that met his eye. He came toward me noiselessly, opened his mouth in that mirthless smile, and said, in those cultivated tones of his, "The general has married her again."

He didn't give me time for a reply. I stood there numb as if some poisonous reptile had struck and left its deadly fang in my flesh, and I saw him stoop and twitch his employer, Polhill, by the sleeve of his black-leather jacket and make off with him.

Had married her again! I felt a sudden menace in the air. I knew well enough that Faggard hadn't dropped out that information just to pass the time of day. He wanted to strike terror into me. He wanted me to take to my heels. But why? What was the subterranean policy involved? I wasn't meddling with Terrazas. I hadn't taken one step to forward my bargain with Maricopa, and I don't think I intended to. It's true, I was haunted all the time by fear of the sheriff's turning up and asking for a report of progress; but, dealing in intangibles as I was, I felt sure that I could turn him off. It's curious how people delude themselves into thinking it's an easy matter to pull the wool over the eyes of the law.

May's destiny was all that concerned me now. I doubted whether Jim would ever turn up. He had become one of my pet intangibles. It seemed to me sometimes that I could actually see him stretched out somewhere, toes up. His ghost filtered through the walls of my tent in the dead watches of the night and looked down on me with vain, despairing gestures. He was as slick as ever, immaculate, with his beautiful complexion, his bold, shallow eyes, and that long black hair parted in the middle and flowing away each side as smooth as glass. I grinned at him from my pillows and he had to vacate.

Poor old Syd could see the trend of things, and he resented it.

"You had no right to bring that girl here," he told me. "She ought not to be mixed up in this wild business, and Jim wouldn't like it."

Wild? He called this business wild! Hammering six hours a day at the bottom of a fifty-foot shaft, hitting the head of a mushroomed drill with a four-pound hammer—he called that sort of single-jacking wild! Unconventional as the deuce. It hadn't been among his wildest dreams when he set out on that journey in his well-appointed sheep car, and he was unhappy. Dwelling there in the very shadow of the woman who had rejected him—for good and sufficient reason, of course; but he wouldn't understand that—he was eaten out with jealousy, and he wasn't above shooting a little venom even into me.

"Jim?" I said. "The question is, where is Jim? If he's at liberty and there's a spark of manhood in him, why hasn't he showed up here? Swasey's got our address. May has even had one or two polite letters from him asking her to come back."

Syd said, quietly: "You think he is held a prisoner, do you? You say that?" His pale eyes held an ominous gleam. "Well, who would have the best motive to keep him away out of the limelight, I wonder, of all of us?"

I saw his point, and I had such a complete contempt for his mental processes that I gave him precisely the jolt he was angling for.

"Why, I would!" I said, in nasty tones.

'So you think, no doubt," Syd said. And he

looked at me with an abhorring scintillation of the eyeball.

"So," I retorted, in a towering rage, "you accuse me of putting him out of the way to serve my own romantic purposes, hey?"

"I make no accusations," Syd mumbled, "only I do say you forelaid for this somehow, and you are thrown into much too intimate relations with her here."

"For her own peace of mind, you mean?" I sneered. "Why not let the lady herself be the best judge of that?"

"As far as that goes," Syd said, fairly shaking, "don't think for a minute that if it should happen that Jim didn't put in an appearance your position would be any stronger, because it evidently wouldn't."

He pointed out through the tent flap. I shrugged my shoulders and humped myself over, lighting another cigarette, to conceal that greening of my features that I thought must be visibly taking place. The picture I had got was of May, all aglow, with a lariat looped upon her arm, imitating that Australian's motions with those charming, supple gestures that had power to conjure romance out of thin air.

I felt that premonitory flicker through my blood that bodes no good to the odd party, but I never stirred. That Australian was handsome as a desert god, tall and lean. His eyes were mysterious and pleasantly crinkled at the corners, and an oily bang, black as night, hung over his left temple. He was a skillful puncher, I agree; but more than

that, he was a ravisher of women's eyesight—right. I had known in my first glimpse of him that he would be a jeopardizer of my bliss.

May must have seen and felt it, too. Right at the first, when I asked her what progress she was making in the art of flinging a grass rope, she pitched me a glowing eulogy of that man's methods and wound up by saying: "He's going to show me how to point a shooting iron, too. You know all my experience has been with long-barreled guns."

And I said, "That will be delightful."

"Sarcastic!" May flashed at me.

It wasn't sarcasm. It was tearing jealousy—that disease—and the little witch knew it. I could see with half an eye that there was truth in Syd's view that that Australian was going to be formidable in the event of Jim's considerately dying. He had that languid grace and that look of having had a wild past and lived it down and atoned for it in manful fashion that women will go miles to see, and never will forget, once they have seen it, either. His speech was a kind of caressing drawl. It did sicken me, I can't and don't deny it, to see what a stand-in he had got with May already, although I couldn't believe she would be shallow enough to fall for those superficial parlor tricks of his without one little whimper or one cry for help.

I turned away to keep Syd from seeing the light in my eye, and went into the kitchen shack, where Clint and Dan Sprowl were talking gold. That shaggy old adventurer was sitting in a baggy

canvas chair and smoking a cigar. Every so often he gripped his beard and raised those spiky eyebrows. He was a hairy old man with cavernous eyes, and a dim flame still burned there, a gambler's light. Tufts of hair stuck out of his ears and nostrils, and he had a habit of tweaking individual hairs out of his nose to punctuate his arguments.

Tawgy was telling him that Swasey had sent him here with a strict injunction to find gold if there was such a thing as gold on the property—stop at nothing. Faith would remove mountains—even a grain of mustard seed, for that matter.

"I have plenty of faith," he shouted, "to say nothing of dynamite."

Old King Knute's very words were like liquid gold. They rolled over that flat and poured into the canyon in a cataract. From time to time he looked worshipfully at Aurelia Sprowl, and she favored him with one of her deep, indulgent smiles. He muttered to me once, when he saw a chance, that she was one woman in a million, and then right away he was back at his job of stunning poor old Sprowl with great clods of optimism.

"These are very old mountains, as I look at them," he said; "worn away by the action of glaciers or something—I won't go into the geology of it, that would only confuse you; but the gold is not over a hundred feet down at most. Why, Mr. Sprowl, I am as sure of striking ore here as I am that this stone will fall to the ground!"

He dropped a prune stone out of his hand, and it's a fact, it did actually fall to the ground. There's no getting away from that. It did duplicate the performance of Sir Isaac Newton's apple, and on that short notice, too.

Old Dan took fire, just as if complete proofs had been brought in, and said, in a quaking voice: "I've always said it, and I stand by my guns. There's a dollar here."

"A dollar?" yells old King Knute. "Mr. Sprowl, there are millions—millions!"

"You can't tell me anything!" Dan roared. He creaked and swayed in his chair, and snapped his thumb joints and tweaked a hair out of his nose. "I know what I've got jest as well as I want to. Where I made my mistake, I put down too many holes instead of going down in one hole. I went gophering."

"It's one of the greatest gold propositions in the world, bar none," Clint said; and do you know, poor old Dan was checked, and he began to get calmer and feel the cool hand of right reason on his brow. Optimists soon burn each other out.

"I don't know that I would go that far," he said. "Of course, it's a comfortable thing."

Tawgy wouldn't listen to words as mild as that. He pounded the table and yodeled: "You take the Golden Girl alone! I have given her a careful going over, and I say the main body of ore is lower—much lower." He paused for breath, and added, mysteriously: "A fault has occurred. The vein is broken, slid off or got turned under. But it's there, and it's got to be found."

That unlucky old seaman had lost every cent he had in the world to the tune of those same words, and now he repeated, "Yes, certainly."

"The point is," said Clint, "we have got to go—on—down. It's all in those three words."

He held up three fingers.

"Yes, that's it. Go—on—down!" roared Sprowl. "I realize it now. That's what the government expert said that was here."

"He did?"

"Yes, or as good as said so. He said it wasn't on the surface, that was certain."

There was a little cold water for Tawgy, but his face didn't lose radiance.

"Of course it isn't on the surface," he said, boisterously. "Nothing of any importance ever is on the surface. Look at the Black Prince! Look at Cripple Creek! Not so much as a thread of gold at two-hundred and fifty feet! Not a glimmer! But those men went on down—a thousand feet—two thousand feet—and there it was, like Solomon in his glory."

He got hung up there, because Aurelia had come round back of the old fellow with a bottle of amber-colored fluid in her hands.

"Go right on," old Sprowl said. "My arms get a little numb toward night, and Aury soothes 'em down in rattlesnake oil. She's got the strength of a man in her fingers."

The old man sighed and lifted his eyes. They rested on a crude oil painting, from which he had never parted, of a full-rigged ship in the bloom of the northeast trades, her bluff bow creaming

seas of peacock blue. A moon made out of a piece of mother-of-pearl was sailing high in that romantic heaven and shedding such a blaze of white light that the ship's running lights of red and green were mere sparks.

"She was a good ship," he muttered. "I mind coming aboard and yelling, 'Settle away!' to that first crew, and the supercargo coming down to us and saying, 'Gentlemen, the sun is over the foreyard,' and opening the sextant boxes. Always the gentlemen, Mr. Trufant. A far cry from that to this, Mr. Clint. There's no seamanship here."

Clint had spread out the blue prints and was poring over them; but he couldn't concentrate, and his talk got aimless as the devil. He was fascinated by the calm vigor that big girl displayed in kneading the old man's arm. Her cheek began to glow scarlet with exertion. A strand of hair touched her cheek. She blew it away. To do that she had to pout her lips, and that pout melted in a smile that passed right through Tawgy's pores.

CHAPTER XII

THIS love affair of Clint's I did nothing just at first to forward. His affairs were mixed enough without his taking on that added contract. He was great-hearted enough for anything, and I idolized him. My status as partner was only a genial whim of his, but I spent my days wrestling with the problem of how to justify myself to him as such. I worked through those blazing yellow days like a fiend, and at night came home breathing optimism. I got thin and corded on that vegetable diet—muscular, too.

"You really are going to have a respectable physique one of these days," May told me, quietly, one night when I was washing up. "Those deltoids are not to be sneezed at right now."

"I'll be quite a little prodigy when I grow up, I suppose," I gritted, my head plunged in the basin. I came out glittering, and flung at her, "I never did suppose there would be any fluttering in the dovecotes over my physical appearance."

"Didn't you?" May said. "Then you're the first man born of woman to be so modest."

Nasty little cross-grained imps were jumping all through our conversation those days, and I can't account for it. Every waking thought I had was directed to that girl. I wouldn't have

hurt her for worlds, and yet I couldn't bring myself to be decent to her, except by fits and starts. I suppose the supernormal state of our relations would account for that. It certainly took all the resolution our youthful spirits could muster up to preserve the *status quo*. I felt in those days, too, the full force of that Latin motto May got Syd to translate for her one night after she had washed the dishes and sent Aurelia for a walk with Tawgy.

"I copied it from that plaque over Mr. Swasey's desk," she said, "while I was working for him. '*Fata volentem ducunt, nolentem trahunt.*' Translate it, Syd."

"The Fates lead the willing and drag the unwilling," Syd said, promptly.

"Really? And I studied Latin, too, only four short years ago! Isn't it fierce how it goes from one? Well, there never was a truer word," she sighed.

Syd and I were stuck for repartee, and Syd got up and dusted off his knees and walked away. My society fell on him like a blight, and I judge he had begun to get up his case against me already. I suppose I ought to have thrust him neck and crop out of camp, but I didn't do it. I had too great contempt for him."

"Sweet character!" I breathed.

"He's more to be pitied than anything," May said. "He never had the proper bringing up. He was an only child, and his mother just worshiped him and waited on him by inches. Poor Syd, he really feels neglected! You mustn't for-

get that he isn't adapted to life in the open, as you are."

"He certainly does appreciate what I'm doing for him, I'll say that," I countered. "It's touching, the veneration that man has for me."

"Why must you always rub him the wrong way, then? He was telling me how you boarded his sheep car," May went on, idly, "and I thought I should shriek in his face. You're the limit! But it was awfully funny, wasn't it? I suppose you really have nerve enough for anything. Tell me, did you actually mean to follow me at that time?"

"What time?"

"You know."

"To the world's end!" I averred. And May said, simply: "Slush! Well, here we are, my hearty."

She rolled over in the canvas chair and tilted up that pretty shoulder against me. Still I fancied she was pleasurably stirred, and there was even a kind of challenge in her last utterance, or would have been for a man differently constituted. Isn't it reasonable to suppose that the sympathies of any well-grounded woman would be enlisted to reflect that she could draw a live man halfway across a continent by just the intimation in one vagrant kiss?

"I don't suppose you ever gave Syd a serious thought," I dropped out, and May said, archly:

"Didn't I, though? I thought at one time—of course that was before I went to Chicago—that Syd was the most beautiful thing that ever was.

But then he did get on my nerves, and finally his goodness simply appalled me and I told him I felt like a black sheep when I was with him."

"He couldn't understand the game of copenhagen," I ventured, slyly.

"Did he tell you that?" May said, rounding on me and her jaw dropping. "Oh-h, I don't care! For once my conscience is clear."

"For once," I repeated, dismally, and May didn't follow up with any protective qualifications, either. She just went on.

"Well, you can imagine, I knew then I wasn't the girl for him. I couldn't abide the notion of being tucked under any man's wing that way he wanted, not the best man that ever lived, and I told him so. I told him I had to have excitement just the same as air, and he couldn't give it to me."

"Jim was one that could follow through with that stuff, then," I murmured, and to my intense delight she made use of the past tense, too.

"Jim was more the adventurer type," she said, thoughtfully. "You'd like him. You two would have lots in common. Not a ladies' man, you know. He used to say himself he couldn't shine in a crowd if he tried. But he certainly was irresistible when he could get a girl off by her lonesome—you know, in a thinking mood."

"Long on sweet-doing-nothing, I suppose," I grated, and May leaned back lazily and scanned me for traces of satire.

"Plenty of tang, if you want to know," she said then.

She gave me a boding, homesick look, and right

away I saw that I was only ramming my head into a barrel of jam on that tack, and I drew away. I couldn't think of one solitary thing to say, either. There was a kind of charmed, blue stillness pouring past our ears, and those southern stars were flaming like torches over the flank of Triangle Mountain. Somnolence was in the air. That dead cornfield back of the kitchen shack kept whispering some tragic secret, and by and by a puff of aromatic wind got into my nostrils.

I stood there dreaming, and only half woke up when May pushed into my hand half of a split cow horn which had been used as a cradle for washing gold in the old days when they were panning the sands down below.

"Dip it in the *oya* for me, please," she said.

Gad! I had been simply enchanted by the disposition of the pale folds of that muslin dress of hers! I had turned her into something glowing and voiceless, a charming white phantom. It took the fleeting touch of her finger ends to renew the seductive fullness of her bodily appeal.

I went over to the *oya*, a big earthen jar swathed in wet burlap, hanging from a wooden peg outside the kitchen door, and I stood there looking in and listening a second or so. The old seaman's eyes glittered in their cavernous sockets. He pawed his beard and swayed from side to side. Knute's forcible interpretation of the beauties of his estate was a rare tonic to him, rain on his thirsty soul.

That lucky Swede, my partner, swept his blue prints back and forth and jabbed his finger at vital places in the claims. He called them familiarly

by name in Spanish—the Harsh One, the Hard One, the Hidden One, the Lost One. They expressed in their very names the difficult lives of men who had wrestled with them until now they were so many distinct and grievous personalities. Old Knute was voluble all right, and he had thunderous convictions, too, stowed away like solar energies in that serviceable barrel of a body.

"What are they talking about?" May whispered, when I stood over her again.

"Gold."

"Gold, gold, gold, gold! Heavy to get and light to hold," she murmured, holding out her hand for the horn. She drank a little, but I seized the horn before she could empty it and drained it off. It went to my head, and I felt positively giddy when she touched me on the arm and said, "Come with me."

She wanted to go down into the canyon—the Canyon of the Fools.

I moved beside her, and I felt carried beyond myself, whirled away, body and soul, in that giant symphony the Organ seemed to be muttering up there on its stone saddle-back. You must have experienced yourself this mute gathering of forces below the threshold of the brain.

It was black down there, black as a splatter of magician's ink; so black under those cottonwoods that the buzzards couldn't be seen sitting upright in their niches; so still that I heard my fool brain tick in the pauses of our conversation.

Those two tunnels driven in side by side at the base of the great porphyry dike running east and

west there stared me out of countenance, I know that. Not a sound but the music of the spheres, either. Here and there on those bloated crags I could see rude cairns, discovery monuments topped by tin cans nailed on upside down, witness trees in weirdly twisted shapes.

Suddenly May gave a lonely little shiver and shrank back against me hard.

"Bobolink, are you there? I'm plumb afraid, old-timer," she wailed. "I thought I had lost myself in some fearful dream. Are we actually here?"

"Thank God, yes," I murmured, but it was probably half nervous impulse to seize hold of the real and confirm it that resulted in my putting my arms right round her in a kind of clumsy reassurance. It wasn't well timed, though; not well executed, either. She thrust against me hard, slipped away from me with one decisive little turn. There wasn't any loss of friendship, I should say, because at once I heard her rapid little voice telling me that there was something about this whole place that fairly took her breath away, it was so silent and unreal.

"I feel as if a breath might blow it all away," she said.

"Like a phantom," I rejoined. I went on in a rush of candor and told her that before I met her I used to think the whole world was a phantom—no blood, no body—a sort of splendid illusion rising into the skies, and all its branches, like the banyan tree's, bending down and taking root again in hell.

"I don't see it that way now," I said, softly.

I felt as if I had said something then, and May did, too, because she said at once, "You ought not to say things like that to me."

"Why not?"

May answered, with extreme faintness: "I hardly know. They seem too intimate."

It was just as if Jim Harper had risen in my path like a sinister shadow at a time when I was in the mood to feel certain that he was hardly better than a legend. My search for Jim had one of the characteristics of my search for gold in its early phases. I couldn't forcibly imagine his turning up at all. I simply couldn't visualize it, and yet the talk swung round to him like the black end of the needle to the magnetic north. There was an attractive force to that precious intangible, and I sometimes desperately thought that my chances would improve if we could somehow smoke him out into the open.

"Bobolink," May whispered, "what if Jim were never to come back?"

"Well, what then?" I breathed, and I tingled from head to foot.

"It's the not knowing," she breathed. "It just about kills me. I sent him here—I can't get around that. If it hadn't been for my urging he would never have come."

I was getting restive, but May had opened that vein, and she did bleed it freely. Jim would suffer the tortures of the damned before he would see a hair of her head harmed. That was one thing about Jim. People could criticize him and heap

all manner of abuse on him; there was one thing he wasn't lacking in, and that was courage.

"I know he's not perfect. I don't ask for perfection, but I do think a girl has a right to know that the man of her choice won't hold back in the pinches, and I know that Jim would never abandon me of his own free will and accord," she went on. "Do you know, I can't help feeling that his spirit does hover here somehow. It's—it's uncanny, Bobolink. Every time I turn I think he's at my elbow. I've heard his voice a dozen times, and I've been waked up three nights running by hearing his voice calling my name in a whisper. It's terrible. Do you believe in mental telepathy?"

I told her shortly that I didn't.

"Is that so? I asked Harry Rolfe and he said he positively did."

Rolfe! That Australian wasn't one of my intangibles. I thought I knew how to deal with him, and I told May frankly I did wish, while we were here together, she would be a little more careful how she admitted that man into her confidence. She gave one of those exasperating little laughs that mean everything and anything.

"Why?"

"You don't know who your neighbor is in a place like this," I said.

"That's nonsense. Harry Rolfe! My neighbor! Why, he's as open as the day! I trust him as I do myself. That is a good joke. I'll have to tell him he's a suspect."

"You tell him that and you've seen the last of me," I said, savagely.

"Don't! You'll have me in tears," May said, with tender mockery.

She very nearly did have me in tears, it's a fact. I had a lump in my throat to see how far we had drifted apart, and I couldn't go on with my argument. I simply bowed my head and groped round and got hold of her hand and wrung it silently.

That contact did more than anything else to loosen us up again, and she whispered: "You poor Bobolink! Quit using your brain for a hammer. It's too soft."

May was always careful to conciliate me after one of our snappy interchanges. She believed in cleaning up rag ends.

"You dear old cave man, where's your club?" she cried, deliciously, and I saw everything that was implied, of course. "I really do feel like a cave woman, too," she said, "with all these caves staring me in the face."

She actually put up those impulsive hands and let down that mass of blue-black hair and switched it over her shoulders with that wild little self-forgetful laugh of hers. May was never one to mope.

I tell you no healthy girl can worry too much about an absent lover of Jim's stamp when there is a man in her neighborhood who can give her the right emotional reactions. And don't you think, anyway, the wilderness inevitably compels to the candor of natural relations? I do. People are thrown together there and staggered by their own littleness in the face of those brooding immensi-

ties, and that draws them together. They can't escape each other, either.

I know I felt as if May and I had got to the world's end, and as if I had come up with her after a long chase. That cave-man stuff squared with my ambitions to a T.

"Which is our cave?" she inquired, and she answered her own question, "There, that one, with the firefly in it."

The firefly! I hadn't seen any firefly in those parts, but it was true a gleam of light had seemed to shine for an instant in one of those saurian mouths. As a matter of fact, May had pitched on the side entrance to the Queen Louise, a property owned by New York men. Uncle Peter Danforth was keeper of the Queen Louise, and had been any time this seven years while her stock was selling in the East. The lady stood two hundred feet deep in her stocking feet, according to Uncle Peter, and that big lateral tunnel, or adit, he had fitted out with wooden shelves and used as a refrigerator.

The refrigerator! It had cost those Eastern investors a hundred thousand dollars already to provide a place for him to keep butter and eggs in, he was fond of averring with a toothless smile—even temperature all the year round. I couldn't help thinking of those people who were cherishing the illusions that rear their heads out of the glittering surfaces of certificates of stock. Wouldn't it surprise and dishearten them if they could suddenly be set down in the very scene of these fabulous operations? What would they say to this mournful

canyon, to these crags covered with cactus in wild shapes, these jumbled bowlders, these forlorn and haggard men and women moving here like shapes of sorrow, hoping against hope, and only bringing down their hairs with bitterness to the grave?

"Wait here. I'll see if anybody's home," I said to May, and I jumped into the refrigerator at a venture.

I heard May's little cry of dismay come tailing in after me as that jet blackness swallowed me up, but I wouldn't draw back then for any money. I couldn't think what that firefly might be. It bespoke a presence there, and I had reached the conclusion that Jim Harper himself was lurking in that labyrinth.

That would account for those queer shivers May's psychology was sending through her—telepathy, too. Well, I got confirmation of my suspicions in a second, because I heard the lisp of a step retreating there, going ahead of me ever so softly with a slight grating noise. When I stopped, it stopped, too, and when I went forward it fled from me again. I put my arms in front of me. My heart was going like mad, and then for the first time I smelled smoke—tobacco smoke and perfume blended.

I stopped short, dizzied, stretched out my arms to the jagged walls of that tunnel. I couldn't reach them. Hor far I fell short I had no means of judging, but from that instant I felt as if every support had been stripped from me, as if I was floating, disembodied, floating on the bosom of a mad delusion—featureless, formless. I didn't dare

go either forward or back. I reeled on the edge of a subterranean abyss, then made a panic lunge and collided with a yielding body.

It did yield surprisingly. So surprising was the mere fact of my encircling it there in that fashion that it must have taken me five or six seconds to sense that it had pith and proportion; that, in short, I had pinioned a woman's bare arms to her panting sides. I felt then as if I had been hooked. I felt as if I was being drawn up from a great depth like an eyeless fish from a fathomless bottom, doomed to explode as soon as I reached the surface by reason of that expansive power within me that was calculated to resist great pressures.

I affirm to you that I was highly resistant, yes; but nothing moral could resist that whisper in Spanish, accompanied by a light breath on my cheek, the echo of that former dream: "Kiss me, kiss me, kiss me! Love me, kiss me!"

Incarnación! She pitched me those words without the tune. Stripped of the air that touches them with a kind of veiling poetry, syllabled mysteriously in the dark, they came to me as the crow flies. Freighted, too, with the fierce seductiveness, the wild livingness, of earth itself, shouldn't you infer from all the circumstances? Inky made the very word "refrigerator" a mockery.

I bent my head and collided with those sweet lips. May's firefly! What lips! Implacable and insatiable! They had the same detaining genius her eyes had—they clung. The placement was

perfect. I felt as if I had filtered through the wall that separates the two worlds of the seen and the unseen, and I acted accordingly. On any other assumption my position would have been thoroughly false, and Syd would have been the first to acknowledge it.

"After this the deluge," I remember thinking, and I did feel as if I had put my hand to the plow and as if there could be no turning back. Sorceress that she was, I thought she was going to draw the living soul out of my body, as the poet dramatically says, and I did ultimately break contact just in time to thwart her. An ugly thrill passed through me, too. I scented ambush. What evil genius had precipated me into that woman's waiting arms for a second time, and this time at a moment when I had all but forsworn her—when I had forsworn her altogether, if it comes to that?

Evidently the demons of the desert meant to hold me to my contract.

"What are you doing here?" I whispered.

"My house is yours," she whispered back.

She had a sense of humor, which is deadly in a woman. She wasn't visible, and yet I could fairly see the eloquence of that long body, the lazy archness of those brows, the fawning tyranny of those eyes. I was on the verge of begging her—on my knees if it should come to that—to make velvet paws for once; and yet—it's strange, humiliating, if you choose—when she half turned in my arms that faint embrace of mine quickened, contracted, imprisoned. I can't account for it, unless by

saying I had clutched at her as a drowning man clutches at a straw, a man in a maelstrom.

"Inky!" I stammered.

"You had forgotten me," she said, simply—"you who think women are nothing but pictures in the heart."

Pictures! Visions! Things floating, ethereal, detachable at will! Had I thought that? If so, I know better now. A glance cannot be given and then silently retracted. The very air has paths, takes indelible impressions. There are moments lived that not all the omnivorous sink holes of time can swallow up.

"I had not forgotten you," I said, "but it is true that I must go now."

"Ah, your rib is waiting," Inky purred.

"My rib! My conscience, no!" I faltered.

I reached out again to finger the sides of that jagged tunnel. It was like a frightening nightmare. My rib! *Mi costilla!* That's a genial Spanish way of alluding to your wife, reminding the offending Eve that she is, when all is said and done, only a small part of Adam's osseous structure, a fanciful overelaboration of one of his two hundred and six bones.

"You are living in a fool's paradise," Inky whispered, hotly. "I know her, my Roberto. She is all ice, that woman. She will not be moved. She is waiting for another man. Shall I tell you where that man is, *amigo?*"

"That man? You know where he is?"

"Shall I tell?"

"Is he—in danger?"

"Only from himself."

I hesitated, and the words froze on my lips. I couldn't conceal from myself the fact, ominous if you like, that I didn't want to know where Jim was. If he was in danger it was only from himself. I hadn't even the moral tenacity to wish to penetrate that cryptic utterance. I was content to swallow it whole. If he wanted her he must come and take her.

"I care nothing for that man," I said, hoarsely. "Don't name him to me!"

"I am silent—to please you," Inky breathed in my ear. "In the meantime, why do you court death here?"

"Death?"

"Veritably! A shirt incarnadined! Here, in the Canyon of the Fools! My poor Roberto, you are nail and flesh with death. Do you think the tiger is not on your trail already?"

"The tiger?" I repeated, lamely.

"Who else? Terrazas! You cannot deceive him with all your drilling in the Neck-or-Nothing. Why are you here, he asks me; and what am I to tell him? He accuses you of wearing a shirt of eleven patterns. Has he not seen me folded in these arms? Draw them tight, Roberto. A-h! He is jealous, and what his eyes show him he remembers. Come with me, now, out of this Canyon of the Fools—to-night. There are safe trails. I will show you. Come! It is time to cast short hairs into the sea."

"What does he know? What can he know?" I countered, feebly.

"He suspects, and suspicion alone will make a good egg rotten, *amigo*. Come!"

"No!" I cried.

I felt the danger, the pulse of intrigue at my finger tips beating riotously, and I was determined to be quit of that importunate woman for all time. And yet I was disingenuous enough, to say, when I heard her dismayed breath, caught in the dark close to me—she had felt me withdrawing from her arms—"*Hasta mañana!*"

Until to-morrow! There was my old instinct for procastination coming into play. It simply wasn't in me to chop anything off short that promised romantic developments. I groped my way blindly out of the refrigerator, shuddering at my escape from that danger, and at the same time abhorring myself for my craven failure to embrace it. I excused myself by saying that I had too many irons in the fire.

I staggered out into the blessed starshine, and there I saw my valiant May standing, poised, expectant, the slim figure taut as if meditating flight, and I wondered if the foul fiend had actually daubed me over with the hues proper to my treachery. I stood before her and I felt as if whatever I might say would appear cruel and heavy-handed, ironical with its double meaning. Those few moments had warped me, twisted me out of all semblance.

When she asked me, in awed tones: "Wherever have you been? I thought you had fallen through," I could only say, harshly and mysteriously: "Through the wall! Through the wall!"

CHAPTER XIII

UNTIL to-morrow, I had said; and do you know I didn't go back to her on that to-morrow? I scarcely know how to account for that dereliction, because, after all, it was dereliction. I had struck a bargain, nefarious though it might be. Intrigue was of the essence of it, and for once in my life I did voluntarily shirk intrigue, there's no disguising that. I told myself that I had everything to hope and nothing to fear from holding on; but I couldn't convince myself. I called to mind more than once that dictum of the canny Latins that woman is made for man's confusion—*Mulier est hominis confusio.*

Be that as it may, I gave the refrigerator a wide berth on my way to that Neck-or-Nothing claim where Clint and I were grappling with the elusive specter of free gold, or fool's gold, whichever it might turn out to be. I broke with the past, and yet, in spite of that elaborate precaution, I felt a kind of distillation of that Spanish mænad in the air I breathed, in the fierce sunshine, in the aromatic wind, in the haunting music of the Organ. She came sliding toward me through the very joints in the stone we were drilling. And the fact of that invisible companionship, with its fatal consequences, stalked abroad somehow. I had that

hideous sensation of looking two ways, and of being known for a man who looked two ways and took his comfort where he could find it.

I was a marked man, and I knew it by the way Azalea Blendon had of referring to me sardonically as El Romántico—The Romantic One! She spent most of her time in that wooden chamber nursing her ailments, and when she did come out of her shell it was to strike a fang deep into the flesh of one or another of those optimists. La Vibora, Juan called her. The lady viper!

"Have you made your fortune to-day, man of mystery?" she said to me one evening.

"Mystery?" I shouted. "What is there mysterious about me?"

"I've touched you on the raw, haven't I?" she taunted me. "There's no need to take that boisterous tone with me. I said mystery and I mean mystery."

She opened her eyes wide under that black bang, and went on fussing with her finger nails. She must have learned something from her confessor, Doctor Faggard. I had the feeling, just as Clint had had, that she had laid me open with one cleaver stroke, and I very nearly took her aside and begged her to keep silent if she did know anything incriminating. I was within one of wresting the shirt away from my throat and showing her that star of a deputy sheriff pinned to my undershirt, but I felt the time hadn't come for that sort of thing.

She let drive with another of those masked batteries of hers by saying, unpleasantly, "Your

protégée has been doing a little target shooting to-day."

She pointed to some heaps of green glass on the ground, and I didn't need to be told that May had potted those with the Australian's shooting iron. That was a new phase. She was rapidly getting to be a dead shot with that type of small arms. All that money of Syd's and Jim's that she had spent in shooting galleries hadn't been in vain. She had pure instinct for shooting. It comes of that deep confidence born of abiding faith in the co-operation of unseen powers, people tell me who ought to know. There was a prayer in her trigger finger, in other words, and when she raised that girlish arm something had to go.

"From all I hear," Mrs. Blendon added, "it wouldn't do any harm to take a few lessons from her, probably. But perhaps you feel that she is sufficient protection in herself."

I could have wrung her neck cheerfully. I took note of its withered and creased aspect minutely, but I simply grinned.

"You seem to think things are on a shoe string with me," I managed to bring out.

She merely arched her brows with a fleer and said, dryly: "Things are on a shoe string with most of us out here. If your Mr. Swasey doesn't find his capital in short order I guess we shall come to drawing lots."

She spoke the truth there. Things were on a shoe string with the Sprowl outfit. Food was running low, and nothing but diplomacy had been forthcoming from that fox-faced man at Madcap.

If we didn't strike gold in a day or so we should have to tighten our belts. Already we were rationing ourselves. I affected to take that matter lightly, however. I averred to her that spiders had spun a web in the powder box that morning, a good sign.

"Look out they don't tackle the provision box next!" she flung at me.

I wilted and slunk around the corner of the kitchen shack—and ran plumb into May.

"Listen to me, old-timer!" May said. She had picked that name for me straight from the Australian's lips, and it increased her patronage of me a hundredfold. "I heard her jumping down your neck, and what she says is true. What we need is ready money so that you men can go on with your drilling, and I have a scheme."

"What is it?"

"It's for me to start a specialty shop at Madcap."

I had been expecting this, but I thought I knew whence the suggestion emanated.

"I'll have to veto that," I said, abruptly.

"The ayes have it just the same," May said, as cool as cool. "Now, Bobolink, listen to reason. You wouldn't have me simply sit and fold my hands, I hope—a great, grown woman."

"I thought you were learning how to point a shooting iron," I retorted, in hostile accents, and she smiled at me and said that already she had got her diploma in that science.

"Harry says there's nothing more he can teach me," she added.

Harry! He called her May, too—already! What got under my skin was her nonchalance in turning acquaintances into bosom cronies overnight. I taxed her with that, and she said that the open spaces and the desert air bred these comradeships. She never had believed in standing on ceremony, anyhow. On this occasion I was silent on this point. She dropped into Dan's canvas chair under that dead fig tree.

I felt that if I was going to pry her loose from that man's affections I would have to steer clear of strong-arm methods and play the iron instead of forcing it, as I had more than once told Mrs. Gowdy. I walked all round her chair in a reverie, and got round in front of her again. Her eyes were closed. She looked pale, too, in that starshine; but she reached out her hand after a time, with the touching certainty that mine would close over it without further exertion on her part, without her so much as opening her eyes, and it did. The situation was anomalous, you'll have to grant that.

"You mean," I said, "that you propose to go ahead and earn money enough for us to keep body and soul together while we are drifting through that rock?"

"Briefly, yes."

"I can't see it. I simply can't see it."

"Can't see what?"

"You in the role of a provider."

"Why not?"

"There must be too much cave man in me. I'm the man with the stone hammer in these diggings."

"You certainly know how to use it. Look here, Bob, you're not earning a cent of ready money. Clint's short and confesses it. Food's going. Why not admit the situation?"

"It's not so bad as that," I said, desperately. "We're going to drop down on a body of ore in this Neck-or-Nothing claim now in a very few days—to-morrow, probably. It's a fissure vein, and that means mineral, all the experts agree."

"Fissure fiddlesticks!" May said, lazily. "That for your experts!"

I forgot my exasperation in that sweet look she gave me with the snap of her thumb. A sort of hallucination went with it, and I fancied she was swimming forward toward me through some blue, translucent medium more rarefied than air.

"What are you thinking?" I inquired, huskily, after that great shimmering lapse.

"Inquisitive!"

The stars seemed all at once to burn more fiercely in their sockets over that dark rock reef with its thick pines. The soft wind, with its hint of aromatics, twisted vague shapes into forms of sweetest fancy. It's not too much to say, in the absence of cynics, that all surrounding things were pierced, were heightened, were illuminated, by George! as if some playful master had suddenly laid a few swift dazzling strokes on the canvas of an apprentice! Softness, silence, a sense of something toward—that especially. And then the sound of her placid voice, entirely unshaken:

"How dainty the stars are!"

I chimed in with, "Blue as topazes."

"Topazes are yellow, Mr. McCarty," May said, dreamily. "Yellow as a cat's eye. It's plain to be seen you haven't much acquaintance with the precious stones. But you'll learn."

That charge of a lack of sophistication in the accouterments of courtship came against my ribs with the force of a ram. It seemed to pick out in harrowing detail her own relations with Rolfe, and it threw a light backward along the way she had come that filled me with retrospective jealousy, that unlovely disease so scorned by May herself.

She returned to the attack by dropping out: "What do you think women are for in this world, ornament? That was one thing about Jim. He agreed with me that the relations between the sexes are going to be much more free and easy as time goes on. We used to say we saw no reason why men should think they must monopolize the arena."

"I think you can safely leave the arena to me, just the same," I said. Gad! I was furious!

And May said, "I certainly will if you go pawing up the ground this way."

"I don't want to get started on one of these new-fangled arguments," I cut in, exasperated; "but I do know that woman's part in this world is passive in every way."

"Are you sure you're not overexaggerating?" May interposed, gently.

"I know how men are," I blurted out. "I know how they feel above the sexes. Competition between the sexes won't go down, and it's time

you knew it. The relation is either reciprocal or it has gone to pot."

"Competition! I don't see what competition has to do with it."

"It has everything to do with it," I returned, savagely. "The man doesn't live that will pit himself against a woman on equal terms and get any satisfaction out of it. What would there be to brag about if that was how the game was played?"

"Brag? Brag? Do you think that's the word exactly to use in this connection? It isn't even gentlemanly."

"I certainly do! If the day ever comes that a man can't find some woman to brag to about his day's doings he's going to spend his time sitting on a stump."

"That's perfectly outrageous," May whipped across. "I can't agree with you at all. The world isn't made up of such hollow-hearted poor creatures as you try to make out."

"Isn't it? Put the case—put the case of a man that married a woman smarter than himself, and what do you make of it? The woman is making ten thou a year and the man two. I tell you the rooftree never grew that would keep the rain off those two for many moons."

"If a woman has more brains than her husband he ought to be gracious enough to concede it," May murmured. "He ought to thank his lucky stars, I say."

"He would be a simpleton to tolerate it," I cried, unguardedly.

"What would you do in those circumstances?"

she shot at me with the old mischief in her eye, and I said I would pick up my traps and go.

"I suppose you would say the same if she had actually saved his life," May put in, soberly.

I said, in stormy accents, "I couldn't even imagine a man's marrying a woman who had saved his life."

"That's your romantic temperament," May said, and she positively winked at me. El Romántico! What had I done to deserve being badgered with that word, having it flung at me in baggy folds like an empty wine skin? She didn't mean it unkindly, but then words never did seem full bodied to May. She used them as counters, not as edged tools, where to me they quicken or deaden like a drug, crash through my defenses like a battle ax. Words are more real than things to an ear as delicate as mine.

The upshot of the argument was, however, that May agreed to hold back on the specialty shop and give Clint and me one last chance to look around. We certainly threw ourselves into the business hard, too; but three days went by and netted nothing, and on the evening of the fourth Maricopa materialized.

As I was coming home alone from the Neck-or-Nothing with half a dozen empty coal sacks over my shoulder he stepped out from behind one of those big blond cottonwoods with a low, eerie whistle.

"What under heaven am I going to report?" was my first thought, but he didn't want a report, or rather, he seemed to have it.

"You're doing grand work," he assured me. "Expect the fracas any time now. I suppose you go armed?"

My heart sank a trifle.

"Armed? No."

"I would if I were you. You've got your man to boiling point."

"I'm glad to hear it," I said, and I make no doubt my grin was sickly.

"Is he working the Pandora, do you happen to know?" Maricopa inquired. "I notice it adjoins that claim of you people here."

"Adjoins, yes," I said, "and my chief thinks they are undercutting us secretly and getting away with it somehow."

"Boring through your sides lines, you mean?"

"Exactly! That claim is lower by a cool two hundred feet."

"Why not go down and see?"

"Because that's not in the contract," I exploded. "I have no mad desire to throw my life away in more than one way at a time."

"You might save it that way," Maricopa grinned.

"The rumor around here goes that the Pandora is a trap for a man who tries to see what is at the bottom of it."

"Spring the trap," suggested Maricopa, with a steely glitter of the eye. "Terrazas's strength is growing every hour over the border. If he's got what he's after here he'll be off one of these fine mornings."

I told him gruffly that I would think it over,

and he twirled his mustache thoughtfully. Presently he took a new line.

"Have you noticed any change in the lady's devotion to Jim Harper?" he asked. "Does she think just as much of him as ever?"

I was hot under the collar in an instant, and flared up with some piece of insolence, but Maricopa was steady as a rock. He put his hand on my shoulder and told me the story of the gray mule.

"I have been a cattleman in this country for getting on thirty years," he said, "and in all that time I never yet saw a dead gray mule except once, and that was in a railroad accident, which don't count. And why do you suppose that is?"

I couldn't see what the color of their hide had to do with their immortality and I said as much.

"Because gray mules never say die," he brought out, triumphantly.

He clapped me on the shoulder, advised me to have a look down the Pandora, and in case he, Maricopa, should have the misfortune to be plugged, report my findings to Mr. Spear at Haggett Junction. That was Horse Face, I learned later.

That night, as it happened, I got my first introduction to the Pandora. Mrs. Blendon put her head out her door as I was going past, and, wreathed in smiles, asked me if I could make it convenient to go back with Doctor Faggard to his lodgings at the Empire and fetch a bottle of medicine he had there for her.

His lodgings? I had a dark picture of those lodgings, and the inmates, too; but my infernal

amiability was bound to come into play. I couldn't refuse outright the request of a sick woman. I nodded accordingly, and Doctor Faggard—Los Huesos (Bones), Juan called him—turned his pallid face toward me and said in his cultured voice that he would be glad of my company.

We went down into the canyon together and I felt as if I had allied myself with a wraith, actually with a sort of affable, smooth-tongued ghost who might pitch forward into some crack in space and vanish. That man's footfall made no more noise than a puffball, and I found myself wondering if he mightn't be the ghost of that reason which had long ago fled the canyon.

We were passing the refrigerator then, and I looked at that black arch apprehensively, with a bounding pulse, too, and I seemed to have curling into my nostrils again that smoke from Incarnación's cigarette, and my ears rang with the invocation in those burning and beseeching little words: "*Besame, besame, besame! Quierame, besame!*"

They had danced a devil's dance in my brain ever since, and yet, do you know, I hadn't met her. I had avoided that part of the canyon, and I walked past it now on tiptoe, and Los Huesos himself floated past without a sound. It was uncanny. It wasn't until we had got into the Little Jamboree that he asked me if my motive in coming here had been exclusively to dig for gold.

"Well, no," I said. "I am more the adventurer type."

May's words were still haunting me.

"Ah, you are here for experience," Los Huesos replied, suavely. "You are likely to get that here running as high as a thousand dollars to the ton."

"I don't beat about the bush," I said. "I am here because that girl is here, and everybody knows it."

Los Huesos looked inscrutable as the devil, and politely interested, too.

He said: "She is charming—charming—a young Amazon. But—choke me off if I let fall anything too personal—isn't her heart in some one else's keeping?"

I burst out impetuously that what I was relying on was her mind. She had a remarkable mind, lucid as a diamond. Had he noted that? One of those rare minds that sink through to the heart of a problem in a flash, and I was counting on that keen-edged instrument to cut the Gordian knot that her heart presumably had tied. Yes, I admitted that her affections were enlisted elsewhere, but I let him see my conviction that the world was plastic to the highly imaginative mind. Its combinations were splendid, but they were shifting, too.

"You are romantic," he said, pleasantly.

"So is she."

"Ah, that is different," he said. "A woman may be romantic and still not let go her practical good sense."

I asked him stiffly if he meant to insinuate that I had thrown what horse sense I had overboard, and he said, "Confidentially, yes." Any man who would come here to dig for gold had lost his

grip on realities more or less. "Ask Mrs. Blendon," he said. "There is a woman who has felt the tragedy of this place."

"She is a bundle of suspicion, I know that," I said. "She thinks everyone comes here in the guise of a robber with his hat drawn down over his eyes."

"Ah, suspicions," Los Huesos repeated, with a deprecating gesture. "Don't blame her for that."

He turned his eyes toward me, and I could see pale flames of distrust glowing there, it seemed to me.

"We are all suspicious here—eaten out with it. Your partner, Clint, is suspicious of me, for example. He has as good as told me to keep off your premises, in a moment of exasperation, of course. I am suspicious myself, for the matter of that. I spend half my time grappling with specters."

He flung out those bony arms, and I thought he was going to fall on my neck and sink an unobtrusive dagger through my heart as a casual demonstration of how he felt toward me. Instead of that he dropped his arms and said, quietly, with an ominous gleam, "Even Terrazas, that much-married man, is suspicious."

"Terrazas? Of whom?"

I felt the breath of that danger fanning my cheek anew when he said, lightly, "You." He tapped me on the shoulder and added, shortly: "Take my advice, young man, and hit the Gila-monster trail. The fools are not all dead yet that live in this canyon. Think that over. Well, in the meantime, here we are."

We were standing just outside the Empire, and he motioned me in. The place was lit by just one solitary pale-blue candle drooping on a deal table. This room had been a barroom in the old bonanza days. It was trimmed with a musty crimson calico, and the ruffles and valances and curtains had rotted away in places. Very natty, I assure you. At the far end of the room the remnant of a mirror was flanked by three or four pewter mugs and a couple of cigar vases. Moldy straw matting was on the floor, and several cane chairs were scattered about on it. The doors leading into the rear rooms were made of slight wooden frames covered with dark-blue cotton drilling and hung on leather hinges. In one corner I caught a glimpse of a broken-down champagne basket that had evidently seen later service as a baby's crib.

I saw instantly that one of those blue doors was waggling on its hinges. Polhill had been sitting here, then, and had beat a retreat on hearing our voices. But hadn't I understood that he was deaf, along with his other afflictions?

"Yes, here is a commentary on the Canyon of the Fools," Faggard said, with a wave at a chair. "Ruin, abandonment in the end. They got what they came after, but they didn't take it away with them. They sprang up like those warriors from the dragon's teeth sowed by Cadmus, and fought among themselves until it's lucky if there was one man left among 'em to crawl out of here with a whole skin."

He looked at me significantly, but I pretended not to take it to heart.

:E, YOUNG MAN, AND HIT THE GILA-MONSTER TRAIL.
: *NOT ALL DEAD YET* THAT LIVE IN THIS CANYON"

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"There really was gold in chunks here at first, then?" I inquired, innocently, and I kept half an eye on the door. I looked for Terrazas's squat form to fill it momentarily.

"Yes, they had great bursts here in the days when there really was gold being taken out. One man, they tell me, dug a fortune out of a crevice in the rock with a butcher knife in grains the size of barley, and wound up by prying a nugget loose the size of a hen's egg that sold for two hundred and forty dollars."

He told me gravely that nothing but a strong sense of humor could save a man from being swallowed whole by the monstrous illusion that gold simply had to be in a given place, whether it was there or not. All this with a broad, satirical grin that made me feel as if somebody was stalking me and as if it was two to one that I would never come out of that ramshackle hotel alive.

Still, something held me there. You ask me what, and I can't say; possibly a stray thought of Maricopa teasing out that tawny mustache and trifling with his gun pocket. I sat back, at any rate, after having actually gathered my legs under me for a bolt through that open doorway. I relaxed everything, and I was certain that that courteous specter of a man was playing with me, taking me in his toils moment by moment while I sat there nodding at him, voiceless, letting him call me a fool and a madman for staying there where one breath of treason or one vengeful dagger might mean an end of me and my romantic fancies together.

He played on me to good purpose. Sudden gory visions of my red shirt loomed up as clear as objects in a crystal. And all those fears were precipitated into the form of quaking conviction when I fancied I heard a long, thin whistle from somewhere away in the dark on that spiny hillside. Directly on the heels of that he asked to be excused. Imagine that! He was going to get my medicine, he alleged, and went out with his baffling lack of noise.

There I was, alone in that cave of musty calico. Sweat was running into my eyes. I half expected to see that human wraith reappear in the door with a re-enforcement of troops lent him by Terrazas. My feeling for Terrazas was getting to be like that feeling I had in my youth for the town bully when word was passed that he was after me. After me! Think what those two words contain of hideousness for an imaginative soul! That distant youth had been dubbed the Butcher —Butcher Riley. He lived in a dark quarter of the town named Cornickville, and his appearances were not inferior in panic-producing qualities to those of the man-eating tigers that infest India. I saw him years later, and he was still butchering; but, like Clint, he called himself a meat cutter then, and he had grown humble and respectable.

I mention him because his power over me was so precisely that of Terrazas. There was the same prowling threat, the same insenate something in his methods. He was lost to reason, and mercy was a name to him, or not even that. Your one chance was, when he was after you, to choose your

path deviously, live out your days without ostentation, and above all things keep out of the fearful ambush that Cornickville, since it contained the Butcher, perpetually was.

Well, there I was, plumped down in the heart of Cornickville, after all those years, without henchmen of any kind, and I felt as if the Butcher was due to appear in a second or so and have me spitting cotton.

I wasn't far wrong, either. One of those blue doors to the left of that ruin of a bar began to swing open on its leather hinges with a kind of stealth, and Polhill came shuffling into view. He hauled up short, took hold of a chair top, and bent forward, listening; but I am certain I hadn't betrayed myself unless he had heard my hair stirring. I did pity him, but I couldn't help a thrill of horror going through me, too. There was something hideous in the thought of that wrecked body still harboring a brain that sought out gold as tenaciously as ever, even to the point, probably, of foul play.

I held my breath. I'm confident I hadn't made a sound, but he all at once turned in my direction; and then I had the very same feeling that May had testified to, as I recall. I could have sworn that those blind eyes had seen me, and I got what looked like fair proof of that when he leaped that intervening ten feet like a tiger, seized me by the throat, threw me to the ground, and was in a fair way to strangle me.

That attack had all the surprise features of a cyclone lifting the roof off the house at one flap

and sending the whole outfit sailing. I was suffocated. His grip at my throat couldn't be shaken by any art of mine, and my eyes were popping out of my head when I heard a sharp crack, the noise wood will make coming against bone, and he went limp as a sack of dough.

I looked up. Inky was standing over me, a heavy stick in her hand. Saved again, and by a woman! Her hair was shaken down around her shoulders, and I never saw a woman's eyes flame like that before or since. They were beautiful and terrible. You must have heard these adjectives coupled before in their fascinating application to women.

"Run!" she cried. "By the lower trail!"

She was gone, herself, in a flash, and I plunged through that open doorway and went careening down that trail in great leaps, and getting my legs crammed full of choya spines without knowing it. All gory as I was, when I reached the Sprowl compound I leaned in through Mrs. Blendon's window, brought my head within a foot of hers, and hissed, "He was out of that medicine, after all."

She uttered a faint scream and closed her eyes. It's wonderful to me that I didn't choke the life out of her. Clint was all in favor of it when I told him. He sat there on the edge of his cot, rumpling that yellow mound of hair with one fist and swinging his cleaver up and down with the other. If he had had a block handy I do believe he would have sent her head spinning into the canyon without the least compunction. He

agreed with me, of course, that she had planned that thing with Bones, and that they had probably intended, if not to murder me, at least to ship me out of those parts with my head in a sack.

"We'll be lucky men if we're not all murdered in our beds," he said.

"We will be if we trust that man Polhill's being blind," I answered. "He can see as well as I can."

CHAPTER XIV

I DIDN'T tell May that, of course. I didn't want to frighten her by making that man out any more enigmatical than he really was. And, of course, Mrs. Blendon had no possible motive to blow the gaff at that time. She kept her bed for two or three days, and when she did totter out into the open she treated me with special sweetness.

Well, in spite of everything, those were great days, halcyon days. It was easy to tell Faggard that why I had come here was to be near May —that was truth; but one of my reasons for staying was certainly the off chance of stumbling into gold. I dreamed of that always. If at any time I snatched forty winks I was sure to find gold in tubfuls, great dull lumps of it, and it was part of the folly of my dream that I filled a sack with a selection of fair-sized nuggets, staggered to May's feet with them, and urged her to accept that lucre and fly with me, regardless of consequences and contemptuous of fate—forget that dark phantom Jim who had dogged her days and blasted her young hopes.

And May invariably did. The sight of that easy cash and the magic of my presence combined overpersuaded her. Always the same arguments

and always the same sweet, starry-eyed capitulation, the gladsome opportunism that characters in dream evince.

This got to be my mastering passion. I forgot Maricopa, I quit shadow-boxing Jim, and my pulse didn't beat any faster when the name of Terrazas was mentioned. My ear was tuned to the clink of drills, the hissing of their red ends in the tempering can, the gusty music of the forge, and the monstrous detonations that tore the heavens apart, split the world in twain, heaved up quartz in evanescent mushroom shapes, and left the shaft of the Neck-or-Nothing wreathed in sluggish black fumes.

We had eyes for nothing but gold, Clint and I. There was gold in the air. We breathed it; it was dusted on our fingers; it glinted in our food and twinkled up at us from the sands of the wash. All our plans were contingent on finding it, and we were deadly certain of finding it. Now, with this shot, or if not, no matter—to-morrow or the day after. That conviction took the place of reason, and a kind of creeping fire had got into our veins in place of blood. The time came when I could understand too well what old Sprowl meant by muttering, "My rock, my chain, and my vulture," with that vague gesture toward those remorseless foothills that shut him in; but I was woozy with my own delusion. I told myself that he was old; he had run out all his chain. There wasn't another shot in his locker; not so much as another stud link of that rusted cable.

My business was different. With me it was the

case of youth, glorious, wide-ranging youth, chasing wild geese and oats, experiencing delicate idyls and strange fantasies, heady visions. A man in that predicament lives ten lives in one, sloughs his skin like a snake, assumes new characters as easily as he draws on clothes, and with the same purpose that was in paradise, by Jupiter! Concealment, namely—concealment of the poverty of his essential self. That's half the romantic impulse, in my humble opinion.

It was the old story of the rainbow's foot and the pot of gold, and May Gowdy was my brilliant, many-colored, glowing, and auspicious rainbow. Where she set her foot, there it seemed to me the gold must lie; and when the rainbow faded, then it would be time enough to think of dying.

Syd was the only one who never did take that light-hearted view, and Syd was wretched all the time. He saw something criminal in the search, something criminal in the very shadows, and without half the reason for suspicion I had, either. He didn't believe we ever would find gold, and if we did find it by some unlikely chance, there would be blood on it probably—red-handed sin.

He quoted from Milton. He had found a passage in those deckle-edged classics where the poet speaks of rifling the bowels of our Mother Earth for treasure better hid.

Think of quoting a line like that in a mining camp! Syd lamented that Milton had got only fifty dollars for the entire poem, but I told him it was overpayment if that was a fair sample.

"What are you going to do when the food is

gone?" was one of the strings he used to keep harping on, and we didn't enlighten him. We couldn't enlighten him. Neither Clint nor I could honestly predict what we might do when the morning came, as it was bound to shortly, when we would have to set out for work without anything in our stomachs.

"You are just mad enough to keep on till you drop in your tracks," Syd muttered.

That was very likely. We were light-headed already from living on short rations—a biscuit and two hot cakes apiece in the morning and a plate of Mexican beans at night—and we knew beyond peradventure that if strength was given us to elbow our way ten feet more into that rock, there the gold would lie, the severed vein, thick and ropy. Old King Knute and I used to spring out of our cots like madmen as soon as it was light, counting on being rich before night, luck raging in our marrow, and right away we would get our playful hooks into Syd and wake him up to a consideration of our half-famished, greedy, deep-socketed eyes.

"Awake, sweet slug-abed! Hey, bull, shake a leg! Get your head out of that barrel of jam and come alive! To-day we do it!"

It certainly must have been tough for that moralist to lie awake all night, owing to that hard twist in consciousness produced by the grapple of competing miseries, only to be pounced on at dawn by a couple of wild men dancing around in their underclothes and speaking in terms of drawn gold.

By George! those were mornings, too! Triangle

Mountain would be pink and gray like a heap of hot ashes, and those cottonwoods in the canyon ruffled by the morning wind. They just showed their tops out of the canyon, and really they had a seductive air of being bashful blondes hiding the rest of themselves in that crevasse. We ate our frugal meal and took the trail to the Neck-or-Nothing, Clint in the lead, singing Swedish songs—there were sundog bursts of rugged poetry in that man, there's no denying it—and Juan bringing up the rear, leading the burro loaded with sacks of coal for the forge. Old Dan couldn't come with us. The tax of that spiral ascent was too great for him, but he would come to the head of the trail, stroking us with his hard old paws, telling us to keep a stiff upper lip, and to remember that try never was beaten.

"I know what I've got," he would assure us, and we could be pretty certain that the old fellow would stand there, his arms hanging limp, listening for our last sounds, our exuberant yodeling. He only half trusted our seriousness, and feared we weren't awake entirely to the greatness of the part we had to play.

The foothills would be shadowed, lying there fold on fold like a rumpled quilt of royal purple, under whose folds the sulky genius of the desert slept. And then would come a rosier gleam, a swarming of color in the upper sky. Little floating spurs of cloud would soak up pink like sponges, and all at once fiery javelins of solid gold would strike through the stone pipes of the Organ in one gorgeous sheaf.

Clint would wipe the sweat from his brow, throw up his arms like a sun worshiper, point triumphantly into the gully where the Neck-or-Nothing lay, and shout, "To-day we do it!"

That was one of those claims which, as the government expert had admitted, showed nothing on the surface. It was a hill, not so very different from other hills to outward view, covered with candlewood shoots and giant cactus; or rather, now, it did have the distinguishing mark of a huge slaty dump or platform of pulverized rock hanging on its side, the output of the shaft. It looked like a big ant heap. The headgear of the Pandora, Polhill's claim, our suspect, was visible not far beyond it.

The Neck-or-Nothing was merely a slanted hole, six by six and about fifty feet deep. A rough wooden ladder went into it, and this, reversed, served as a railway to guide the big iron bucket which Clint and I lowered and raised by means of a creaking wooden windlass which straddled the mouth of the pit. The iron handles of this windlass were worn smooth by callous palms, and the sun struck fierce gleams out of them.

As soon as Juan had sharpened and tempered the drills he and Syd descended with shovels to clear out the ground loosened by yesterday's shots. They were no more than vague movements at the bottom of that pit, exploring and tenacious shadows. From time to time a word floated up; "*Otro*" ("Another"). They had filled the bucket, and King Knute and I would reel it up, thrust a

stout wand through an eye in its handle, and stagger away to the edge of the dump with it.

Doesn't there seem now a sublime fatuity in that proceeding? Gold is a taciturn neighbor. It doesn't cry out to you that you are getting warm; it doesn't clink there in that well-locked treasure chest. It plays well its silent and deceiving part in that game of come and find me. It may lurk within an inch of your finger tips; it may be masked by the sheerest film of silica, and your greedy eyes, your groping hands, will pass it by forever.

My feverish gaze alternated between glimpses of that tortuous dark-blue mountain, those immeasurable leagues of tawny desert, and the vacuous depths of the Neck-or-Nothing, striped fantastically by the glittering path of an extinct watercourse. I wondered, but I never faltered; and if I had, there was Clint to conjure up for me anew that vision of sudden luck. He could do it, too, that lucky Swede. Life itself hung by the thread of that narrow vein he was following.

A fissure vein! Such a vein might have the look of the meanest mud seam, but it would lead to mineral. Never doubt that. Sometimes he would select gleaming fragments of bull quartz from the bucket and hurl them savagely into the abysm, and again he would pick up some odd-looking lump, screw the magnifying glass into his eye, and yell out, joyfully, "Now we have got the world by the tail again!"

I took his word for it. Hour after hour he hung his chin on the wooden cylinder of the windlass, his hat pulled over his eyes, which glittered with a

strange and fixed light. And whenever the scraping of Juan's shovel stopped for a second King Knute called down softly, "*Oro?*" ("Gold?") in a voice of extreme and trembling anticipation.

And the voice of Juan the miner would rise to us, oracular, infinitely consolatory, and muffled by depth:

"*Poco tiempo, oro*" ("In a little while, gold").

In a little while! To-morrow or the day after that! Any time but now! It had been found in the past; it would be found in the future; but in the present—that puzzling, irrational, sliding knot binding the future to the past—never, it would seem.

We directed malignant glances at the silent Pandora. Did it veritably stand idle, or was that idleness a blind? We would start broad awake in the middle of the night, too, thinking we heard criminal activity within the limits of the Sprowl estate. What secret treason might not be germinating in that ancient ruin of a hotel beyond it? Why did Polhill, the owner of the Black Prince, affect blindness? Why had he pitched into me like a maniac? Was he still there, he and that ghostly aid of his? We hadn't seen hide or hair of them since that night when Inky had freed me from their grip. Was Polhill dead? Make no mistake, there was strength enough in that robust woman's arm that had crowned him to do a thorough job.

The air was heavy with conspiracy, treason stalked abroad, and in the end we suspected even that complacent Juan, the most faithful of miners

—a man capable of finding nourishment in lemon peel and sand, as he said himself, and of living on memory and hope.

"He is a rope of sand, in my opinion," Clint said to me one night when we were bathing in our favorite pool in the Little Jamboree.

He had put his foot into the cool water and shivered, and I thought some nameless terror had got into his blood. Masses of brilliant white cloud had piled up over the Organ. I looked at him hard against the background of that mighty crown of rock, raised up there so high that I doubted its substantiality—an illusive blue, a cloud shape itself. I reckoned it in with my dream scenery, and I swear the naked body of that Swede —his old dolichocephalic skull floating there, inclosing visions which towered even as high as that Organ into the sunshine, the sunshine of hope—seemed pathetic, and even tragic, to me. I had only half got the infection, I suppose.

"I think he is in cahoots with Terrazas and that man Faggard," he whispered, and he patted that creased abdomen of his dolefully. He looked like a gigantic cherub on the point of tears. "I have made a deep study of these mountains," he cried, feverishly, "and I can swear that that Pandora claim is worthless. The ore begins halfway into the Neck-or-Nothing. That Pandora is deep—three hundred feet deep, sure—and do you know what? They have run through our side lines and tapped our vein as sure as you're a foot high. They are scooping it out this minute from under our feet."

It was Maricopa's own thought, but coming from my partner it had tripled force. My gratitude to old King Knute knew no bounds. I have never before or since given any man the admiration and the love I gave him, and there was nothing I wouldn't do for him.

"In that case, the thing is to have a look down this Pandora," I said.

Clint was aghast. There were ugly rumors of the reception a man was liable to meet with in that shaft. There was said to be a keeper of that mine—not an earthly keeper, either—some lurking horror that nobody had been at pains to particularize, but everybody in those parts had heard tell of. Murder had been done there, according to Uncle Peter.

"That doesn't worry me," I said, "half as much as the condition of the windlass rope. The windlass is broken and the rope may be rotten. But I don't say it can't be done."

Clint's face was cherry red, like a piece of iron in the forge fire, at this breath out of the gusty bellows of hope. He was suddenly alive again in that part of him he used to call his supreme being. He felt in his supreme being that we were on the edge of great things. He busied himself with new visions; he buttressed his faltering position with another hope. Even granting that all the rest of the Sprowl estate was worthless, there still remained the chance—chance? Man, it was a dazzling certainty—that infinite riches were lying caked up there underneath the Neck-or-Nothing. I think you will always find, at the heart of the

born optimist, this singular power to shift the base on which hope rests.

"You think he would actually steal it out from under you?" I murmured, doubtfully.

"Steal?" he whispered. "That man would steal the eye teeth off a dead man's eyes. He is no more a physician than what I am," he hissed in my ear. He was speaking of Faggard, of course.

He thrust that shining, heavily muscled frame of his forward—he still retained a good part of his weight, even on those starvation rations—and then he posed his ten fingers stiffly on a flat-topped rock that rose out of the middle of the pool. Gad! those were fingers that had known what it was like to grip the shank of a mushroom drill! They were square-ended, a good inch across at their tips, and all of the same length. They loomed up there like a line of honest soldiers, and they were equipped with mortal great joints, too, which held them well apart. They certainly augured bluntness in the brain which had to depend on them exclusively as telegraphers of tactile sensations.

"He is a goat in sheep's clothing, that Faggard," King Knute said.

He sank down limply against the grateful warmth of that rock, embraced his lung box in those Titan's arms of his, with their absolutely flawless skin, and stared at me despondingly. I told him manfully that I would know how to splice the two ends of our destinies together when the time came, but he had sunk into a profound lethargy.

I knew, of course, that it was in the nature of an optimist to suffer these sudden reversals of form.

My uncle—the man who shot himself with the nugget, you remember—was a man who, according to my aunt, used to be wafted home one night on a cloud and wheeled home the next night collapsed in a wheelbarrow. I was on the point of making a joking reference to that characteristic of my uncle's when I heard a burro's hoofs drumming in the sand at my heels.

I whirled round with every expectation of seeing Terrazas riding me down. That man's tardy vengeance had given me the jumps, and I confess it freely. If he thought it was a case for daggers, why not palm one and skewer me at once, without more ado? Why all these Hamlet hours? Already I had cursed myself a dozen times a day for having been facile enough to let myself be drawn into that complication with the general's wife for cash and for the shadowy consolation her beauty afforded me. Hunger had driven me to it, perhaps, and not heart hunger, either—the mere hunger for a sympathetic ear, for the touch of a kind hand—and that had been interpreted as a roguish strain in me, and now was likely to be the death of me, the ruin and overturn of my best hopes. I had a grim foreshadowing of events even then, and I saw that they would take the form of retribution for that act, which meant nothing or next to nothing until that little murmur from May had opened my eyes to its iniquity. I see now, of course, that it hadn't any spiritual quality at all.

It wasn't Terrazas that time. It was only Uncle Peter Danforth, the keeper of the Queen Louise and the mailman for the canyon.

"Struck any pay shoots?" he inquired while he was fumbling with his mail bag.

"We can't complain," Clint said.

"No, you won't listen to advice, either. I was saying to my wife the other night, if I had put as much brains and endeavor into an honest trade, in the room of jobbing about in this neck of the woods, I would have something to show for it now instead of jest the forlorn old gentleman himself. Fool's gold in a fool's paradise."

He wagged his head as if the spring of an infinite and saddening wisdom had been touched in him.

"It's fate or it's predestination that takes hold of a man and shoves his nose down, see? and says to him, 'Make a meal,' where he was only thinking to have a bite."

Clint lifted his arms over his head with a shout of laughter, as if he could fling away like that the oppression of those insidious thoughts and traitorous despairs.

"You can laugh," said Uncle Peter. "Well for you you can! I tell you a poor man ain't got no business monkeying with mineral."

"What do you say to the proposition that one good investment beats a lifetime of toil?" Clint inquired, rigorously.

"Toil? Yes, toil will be your portion," the old man said. He wouldn't even voice his contempt for that slogan. "I been mining ever since I was high enough to cast a shadow, and I know. Man alive, I've seen all kinds of ore! I've seen ruby silver, as well as gold, not to mention wire

silver, mister, shot through rock as thick as hairs in my beard here, and jest as white—beautiful ore, beautiful as frost on a window pane; yes, sir, and always on the other fellow's property. I've seen gold taken out of the ground that you could sink a meat saw through that minute, it was so soft. That piece in Swasey's window at Madcap with a hatchet sticking in it ain't nothing. But I never see color in my own shovel, and no more will you. Ain't nothing up there in the Neck-or-Nothing, I take it," the old fellow continued. He lit his pipe and tamped its coal with a finger impervious to heat as a hoof. "Thought not—I say I thought ye hadn't nothing there."

"We got some valuable malibidates out of there," Clint said, sulkily.

"Valuable hell!" interjected the old man. "Don't spend your time trying to mystify an old-timer."

"It's a true fissure vein if ever there was one," cried my partner.

"True fissure, yes. The True Friend was a true fissure, but it's pinched out all the same, the way friends will. Young feller, the deeper you go the closter you will learn that a vein of gold is like virtue in humans—oncet you let it slip away from ye, love nor money won't coax it back."

"You're an old man and time has soured you," Clint retorted. "You don't frighten me. I got to remember just three words."

"What are them three, Mr. Clint?"

"Go—on—down," Clint said, forcefully.

"Three of a kind," Uncle Peter mumbled, with

his nose in the bag. He found at last what he was looking for—two letters in the same handwriting, one for Clint and one for old Dan. He threw them in the sand and turned the head of his burro. For a parting shot he said, with a jerk of his head at the Organ: "Watch them neighbors of yours, whatever you do. Terrazas has got a hornet's nest of troopers camped up there, and if there isn't some deviltry in the wind I'll eat my shirt."

The canyon swallowed him. Tawgy picked up his letter and ripped it open with a movement of the thumb which would have sufficed to disembowel a rabbit. He read it through, and then in a stricken voice he asked if he could have my attention for a minute.

"This letter is a masterpiece," he said. "He is dying down. I could strangle him and there is nothing here but empty air." He sank his face in his hands and groaned through his fingers. "I wrote him about this woman, you know, this devil woman here, and what do you suppose he says?"

He snatched up the letter again. "Here, listen to this: 'We men must put up with the vagaries of women.' With the vagaries! That's some of his literary diplomacy." He drew breath sharply, snorted, sobbed, went on reading. "'Remember they are women and make allowances. Meantime I beseech you to put aside any differences that may arise, and go on down. Shift over to the Purgatory if the Neck-or-Nothing doesn't develop as it should. If you don't strike it in the Purgatory I miss my guess.'

"He will miss his guess."

Clint's cheek glowed like a coal.

"And if I don't strike it in Purgatory I maybe will in hell," he muttered in a shaking whisper. His body was one mass of goose flesh. "Mark, isn't that elegant? He will miss his guess! I come down here by his request; I pry the heart out of me in his service; I sweat and I bleed and I starve —yes, starve. God in heaven, man, look at the slack of that belt"—he had begun drawing on his clothes feverishly. "It's only a question of mathematics between me and eternity. Then to cap all I let this infernal Blendon woman make a monkey of me. I shouldn't wonder if she had joined forces with Terrazas himself. And now he'll miss his guess, will he? It would be better if he had put a thou in here, like I have more than once, and then he could say, 'I miss my thousand.' A man can miss his guess and not be lonesome. Oh, grief, grief, grief!"

I slipped in some soothing word, but Knute wasn't in the mood to listen. He got the bit in his teeth again

"I didn't think anything could equal the love-sickness, but this is worse. Yes, much worse. I lay awake all last night thinking that I have sunk all my money in places like this one way and another, and now I haven't got a rag left to stand on. By this time I might have been a prosperous man, too. I might have had a shop of my own. Grief, grief! I'm a meat cutter, I tell you. I can handle a hundred beeves a day, shank, flank, and loin. Charm bone and feather bone. I can split the

feather bone with one blow of the cleaver, man. It's not as thick as a lead pencil, either."

Gad! he was low! He told me that that letter left him wondering whether he was still head over heels, and there wasn't any consolation prize in Dan's letter, either. He was sitting there oiling a shotgun when Clint dropped it morosely into his lap.

The old man held it up to the light and said: "I know that bold hand. The writing is blackest when the news is most unwelcome, too. It's black now—black as hell. Look at that slash the man makes at his t's. It's like a dagger."

We certainly were fixing for a pleasant evening. Old Dan went through his letter, one fist hung in his beard, his eye glinting. He ground out: "What he says here don't have that hearty ring he got me accustomed to at first. I don't hear talk of that new capital coming in, for one thing. Not a word. He says here, 'I may be several weeks more, or even months, floating this proposition; but as you know, the late Tom Paine said, "The harder the conflict the more glorious the triumph." If try never was beaten, as you say, we will win sure. But we are men who know the meaning of adversity, and we can grin and bear it if we have to.'

"Grin and bear it," repeated old Sprowl, and he did actually grin, too, as advised in that missive, but it was a grin of rage.

Aurelia was setting the supper table outdoors, and she did look handsome enough to topple the birds backward off the bushes. Knute got a lot

of cheer out of that. He whispered to me behind his hand: "Isn't she beautiful? I was telling her just the other night a time is coming when man will be as free as his thought. That will be the miracle. He is chained just now. Yes, chained, you may as well say, to the flesh. Look at Simpson in the Bible. A woman cut his hair and he lost strength. Well, say, Mark, it isn't necessary a lady should be a barber to take the strength out of a man."

Azalea was looking at us suspiciously. It's not polite to whisper anywhere, but in that camp it wasn't politic, either. I shoved at Tawgy's ribs because she was already getting out of her chair and gritting her teeth; but she floated past us and drooped over poor Dan, who was still fingering that piece of literary diplomacy.

She said in that hoarse contralto: "And so you actually hoped something from that man. Oh, the blind, blind folly of it! And yet men call an ostrich a foolish bird for burying just its head in the sand."

Poor old Sprowl took up the stub of his cigar and put a match to it, but he only succeeded in burning his beard.

"Nothing venture nothing have was the principle I went on," he protested, feebly.

"Nothing have," she echoed him. "I guess it will be nothing have before many days are past."

She darted a quick look at Aurelia, and that big girl colored up to the whites of her eyes, as they say in Spain, and bit her lip. Azalea, of course, meant to insinuate that her sister was

thinking already of lighting out with that masterful miner. We were all stunned by the frankness of that attack.

Clint got up out of his chair with a ghastly, disbelieving smile, the smile of a man who can't believe his ears, but goes on smiling in order that his hallucination won't result in a breach of decorum. He was the soul of respectability, and the last thing he wanted was a scene. He made a deprecating wave of that mighty arm and muttered that Mrs. Blendon would find that everything had been done for the best.

"I suppose you call it for the best to forbid my friends this camp," she brought out, with a bright burning in her eye.

"Forbid?"

"Don't deny it! You've forbidden Doctor Faggard the camp. He hasn't been near."

Hadn't been near! Think of the cast-iron nerve she was displaying to so much as allude to the spectral figure of that man Faggard, her accomplice!

"I have forbidden nobody. I have no right to forbid anybody this camp, and I don't," Clint said. "I am only the man sent here by Swasey."

Mrs. Blendon broke out into mocking laughter and cried, enigmatically: "Ah! And the Mississippi still flows unvexed to the sea, I suppose."

Down she went in a heap, and Aurelia supported her, gasping and breathing fire, into her chamber.

The whole camp was getting to be at sixes and sevens over a mine of hypothetical gold, of gold that lives only in the corner of the eye. Wasn't

that ironical? Members of the same family on the point of feeding one another poisoned meat on the sly on account of a fortune in ore that they hadn't seen a glimmer of as yet, and probably never would. They talked about that estate as if it had a negotiable and inheritable value instead of being the thorny terror it actually was.

It's easy for me to take this calm view now—easy-chair sang-froid—but at the time I couldn't look at it in this philosophical light. I was on fire myself. Not ablaze like Clint, perhaps, but still I assure you I could feel the smoldering in my bones.

I would sit hour after hour cramped into the bottom of that shaft, hammering at the head of a three-foot drill, and pouring water out of a crushed little tin can into the hole and heaping up a rag of wet burlap around the rim of the hole to prevent the ooze from squelching up in my eyes, and all that agony would be transmuted into the loveliest visions imaginable, coming in puffs and gusts, brain zephyrs, softer and spicier than any chinook or sirocco that ever blew.

I hadn't given May up, that's the sum and substance of it. I couldn't give her up, and I kept remembering what I had told Syd, that one stroke of the pick might mean a lifetime of the ladies. Believe it or not, a sentiment like that will make a forcible appeal in specially selected cases. More than once, in my preoccupation, I hit my thumb a glancing blow with that four-pound hammer, and still I was too mysterious to curse. Actually!

Every morning I expected to come home reeking

millions in the afternoon, and instead of that I would be oozing blood at the knuckles and porphyry mud at every pore. Happy, though, because I knew that May and I would have all the evening to laze around the flat in and talk about anything or nothing, lying there under a canopy of blue and silver and gazing for hours at a time at the jeweled figments of our fancy pasted up on those celestial ramparts. Sometimes she fell into fits of dark abstraction, and then I would whisper, "A penny for your thoughts," but she wouldn't sell that cheap.

"Talk some of your nonsense and that will cheer me up," she would say. And I did talk, too. I couldn't let fall a word about love with a personal application, of course—Jim's wraith precluded that—and yet through the clear depths of our young talk that conception had to fall and did fall like a precipitate. We had to talk about love and all its mysteries and miseries. Marriage may be the narrowest society, as the Frenchman asserts, but there are others nearly as narrow, and perhaps even more confidential, and I don't remember any more candid moment in my life than those that came of our desert-born conversations. That starry stillness would have convicted us of the least taint of insincerity.

We talked about the loves of Tawgy and Aurelia. May had known from the beginning, she said, how it was and would be between those two. A case of mutual infatuation. Didn't I see how that splendid girl hung on his least word to the point of adoration?

"She's the soul of constancy," she murmured, "and just coming into grass, too, really."

"She has no monopoly of constancy," I muttered in return, and May wasn't exactly displeased. Her hand was hanging down by the side of that canvas chair, and she allowed me to seek it out and press it reassuringly. I felt warm flashes all over me, and dreamy conjectures took their rise in me. And in the next breath I was maddened by the dispassionate tolerance she had for my approaches, as if there was no sting and no threat and no danger in me for a girl to fight shy of. I felt shorn, shorn.

CHAPTER XV

I KNEW, of course, better than she did, what King Knute's position was. I don't know how many times he had whispered to me, hot nights, when we were lying sleepless, and wanted to know if I didn't agree with him fully in thinking that a certain amount of petticoats was good for the soul.

Can you imagine it? That's how complacent that man was. He seemed to think he had to take his women in the form of a bitter-sweet medicine that was good for him, and yet went against him, too. And in the next breath he would be arguing for complete separation of the sexes for the first thirty years.

"That would give a man a chance to make his mark, work days and sleep nights, instead of spending his time dangling," he said, ferociously.

Be that as it may, Clint was getting slowly engulfed. My little friend watched that match mature with as much eagerness as if it had been made or first agitated in heaven. She set her heart on it, disinterested as she was. And I watched it, too, not dreaming that it could have consequences for me, because I couldn't anticipate to what lengths my mad folly would carry me. Fancy the exquisite torture to me of sitting there with May under that glorious night sky, with

spicy puffs of wind coming and going and the shadows cast by those catclaws and young black oaks weaving direful omens at her feet. Imagine the strain of sitting there and discussing the pros and cons of love on a rational plane, with detached calm, and all the while the very glow and pang of love in your own heart, throbbing itself out right there within one of her elbow and appealing to her deepest-seated intuitions. Ask yourself if the thing wasn't so equilibrated that a feather's weight might have inclined any man not made of wood into an ineradicable embrace.

By Heaven! In looking back I wondered at my moderation and I wonder at it now! What was I thinking of, to let slip so many priceless opportunities of pushing a plain advantage? Isn't it queer and laughable, that notion a young man will sometimes harbor that a girl is ethereally compounded and that she will be simply shattered, torn limb from lovely limb, if she receives some fiery token of his worship? A kiss is the thing farthest from the pure diaphaneity of her thought, he argues. A kiss will slay the soul within her, it appears. It's a breach of that confiding trust, a gross onslaught, a low theft, a rending of the seven veils, a dagger in the scented dark.

Well, women do wear their beauty and their glory like a sword and shield in one, doesn't it sometimes appear? There are moments of biting disillusion when some lofty spirit whispers in the young man's ear, "This is not the moment," and he stops short, unmanned, and waits for that fragile being to come three-quarters of the way to

meet him. That's not to say she always comes, of course. The history of man has many vacant pages.

Time and again when I was on the threshold of great utterances I held back, muted by pale considerations like these, and partly, too, by that unsuspecting nonchalance of May's. When I could rally my wits I told myself that any other man would have spoken words of love, and had them confirmed and tangibly reciprocated, Harper or no Harper.

I must have been mild and she must have thought me mild—that charming, unaccountable nomad, with the sheen of a dove, the wisdom of a serpent, and the fiery heart of a romantic. She was romantic from crown to heel, and just coming into grass herself, for that matter. She told me quite frankly that she was romantic and that for years her foolish heart had been looking for the man of men. I gathered, though not from her express words, of course, that even Jim at times didn't answer that description.

I was on the point once of submitting it to her that I did, and I won't admit the absurdity of that impulse even now; but I didn't do it. I couldn't. I had that breathless, encircled feeling around the midriff of an urchin suddenly lowered into cold water against his will.

I couldn't speak, and I heard May running on calmly, "As far as that goes, I don't know, myself, what I want the man of men to do or say."

I gathered that her ideal was a sort of composite.

This gave me a tall view of her experience with men, and it abashed me, and even gave me a kind of inverted envy.

I used to go back to my tent and rehearse and rehearse those voiceless crises when animation itself was all but suspended, those near kisses planted by the dreaming ghost of an affection, kisses that some tenderly dropped word or reminiscent whisper had all but brought on under that arching lapis-lazuli heaven, in sight of those insidiously shining stars. Why had I hung back? What was there to be afraid of? But I was afraid. I would find myself ready to drop to my knees and pray to all the gods to roll back time to the doorsill of that fateful moment once again and let me have another go at it.

I don't mean that May would have been conscious of her invitation—no. She reached her dreamiest heights sifting out possibilities of other people's happiness, it seemed to me. But women themselves scarcely know what it is they may bring back from those borderland excursions of theirs. Isn't that the fact? Their challenge is to all mankind, practically.

We put it all into the mouths of Tawgy and his love. The relation that had sprung up between those two, like some desert wild flower, was peculiarly fitted to bring out talk about the thing that was uppermost in our minds, I suppose. May was naturally full of it because of her anticipations of Jim. She reported to me the least alterations of mood that precious pair of desert lovers underwent. She saw changes of color and internal

modifications that a poker player would have missed, I verily believe.

"And yet if he doesn't strike it rich they will never make a go of it, if I know Tawgy," I said. "He has staked his last dollar here, staked everything on this Canyon of Fools."

"He has staked more than a few dirty dollars," May retorted, and she slanted at me with the full sweep of those lowered lashes. "How little you know of the workings of the human heart, Bobolink! Just wait and see!"

I said guardedly that Clint was a man who knew where he was well off, and what measures to take to keep in that condition; but May simply laughed me to scorn. She told me maturely that when my time came to be visited by passion I would know it in that instant to be a thing as irresistible and smooth as water just quickening toward the falls. By George! I felt dizzy, and reeled a little at the impact of that analogy! May could sometimes unbosom herself of sentiments that had all the force of noble poetry, and do it without turning a hair, too. She had twice my intellectual power, and I knew it. Half the time she had me with my feet off the ground and my heels higher than my head.

"No, say what you like, there's nothing sweeter than those first beginnings of love, when they don't know really what's the matter with them," she affirmed. "Anticipation is everything. Don't you think so?"

I gurgled something acquiescent in the back of my throat, and she said: "They needn't be

rich. Girls aren't so greedy for money as you think. They give the wrong ones to understand that, that's all. No, those two could live all their lives and not miss any of the sweets of life so long as they had each other. It's just the best investment ever."

I was fatuous enough to put in at this point, "One good investment beats a lifetime of toil," and May made an impatient movement of her head and that had me quaking. I did have at that time, and I retain, the conviction that she had ever so much deeper insight than I had into the motives and impulses that actuate our fellow-creatures.

That conviction led me to agree with what she said—agree most of the time. We discussed the deepest sort of questions with the utmost frankness. Young men and women don't seem to make any more account of barriers in this candid age than a horse at a steeplechase, and it certainly makes for clear understandings. May was the first to refer to love as a consolation, I think; and she told me, clear-eyed, that when children came that made a new world for everybody concerned, she believed; and I agreed—agreed in a sheepish whisper.

Gad! I sat there dumb, and I felt as if she had picked up the smoky torch of my life and whipped it into a clear flame over her head! She had the significance of a heroic bronze to me, and when I left her leaning there against that tent pole silvered by the moon I felt queer and palpitant with the sense of there having been gleams of actual genius

in our conversation. The tiger plunge of genius they called it in the last century. You know, as if we had uncovered something new, something that seemed to span the mysterious gulf between the sexes, that gulf that baffles and tortures and invites.

Haven't you experienced that puzzling, bantering style of meeting a man's approaches that some girls adopt, and that willfully shallow way they have of misunderstanding his best things? By George! I've often thought their ideas are as foreign to a man as if they had been set down here from another planet and told to make converts the best way they could! But May wasn't like that.

"Do you know," I said to her, tensely, "it's simply marvelous the way you can sink your woman soul and think a man's thoughts and have aims like his and seek the same privileges, for that matter."

"And why shouldn't I?" she cried. "There's no mystery about that. Why do you always speak as if men and women were strangers in this life? We speak the same language, and really at bottom we think the same thoughts."

"So you think, wonderful woman, but you're so utterly unlike your sisters in that particular. You're ambisextrous, do you know that?"

"Oh, I like that!" May drawled.

I coined that word myself, and it ambled through her heart like a whirling dervish, and looked out through that dear cheek in a fleeting scarlet form.

I called that word to mind later, in the midst of

the period that came on, filled with hangman's gloom—in Juan's phrase, *ahogadero*—the period of her infatuation, or what looked like her genuine affection, for Rolfe. He seemed to have oceans of time at his disposal, and at hers. The stage line grew more and more irregular; and you can imagine whether it was easy for me, on those hot still afternoons, to listen to the sound of May's banging away with Rolfe's gun at those green bottles and tomato cans set up on stakes—not easy to listen to his praise of her proficiency, either. What business had a delicate girl flirting with a shooting iron? I remembered Dean Swift's masterly likening of a woman preaching to a dog standing on its hind legs. Not that they did it very well, you understand; but you were dumfounded to see that they could do it at all.

"I'm going through with it for Jim's sake," May said, in answer to all my objurgations. "I can't tell yet what I may be called on to do, and I'm not taking any chances that I know about."

"Can't you rely on me to see you through with Jim?" I cried.

"Just what is your reputation as a gun fighter?" May came back at me, quietly. "Here, draw a bead on that blazed spot on the oak at the head of the trail!"

She pushed a gun into my hand. I put it down without pulling the trigger. A wave of humiliation went over me, and I muttered that a man couldn't be everything at once, and stumbled away to my quarters. Think how I must have felt to have my bluff called by that one shrewd question put me

by a girl whom I had rescued a thousand times from visionary dangers!

It wasn't as if that was her only accomplishment, you understand. Rolfe had hobbled a buckskin with a mane as black as May's on the Sprowl flat for her especial use. In no time at all she had learned to vault into the saddle with that caressing leg action that seems to be the acme of good horsemanship. She was made for a horse, her teacher said, and she did ride as if she had been thrown into the saddle out of the cradle.

"There's nothing like cantering over open ranges in good company with a good horse jammed between your knees and the steers going like mad ahead of you," she told me, in a burst of confidence.

In good company! It must be plain what an ominous sound those words had in my ear—in the ear of a man condemned to grind out his days like a goblin in a stone cell, pounding, pounding, pounding with a four-pound hammer on the head of a three-foot drill and freedom a million years away. It's true May offered to teach me what she knew about a gun and a horse and a few coils of Mexican horsehair, but I put her off with one reason or another. I couldn't abide that unnatural reversal of the usual order of things, whatever may have been Jim's views.

The truth is I was ashamed to put myself into competition with her. Here were things I had spent my youth dreaming of doing, and May was actually doing them and getting away big. It did take the savor out of things. I began to sym-

pathize with Syd's restiveness in those shooting galleries back in Omaha, and I wondered more and more what the world was coming to when the whims of these ambisextrous women had to be indulged.

And she was a creature of whim. I can't easily forget that night when I came home to find that that Australian had just bobbed her hair for her to overcome the natural tendency that sitting a horse has to jounce out hairpins. She came at me with a jolly shake of her head and a low bow, as if she had been transmuted into a young Prince Charming, and I was black with wrath to see those great, flowing strands lying there on a skirt that she had spread to catch them.

Rolfe stood there, making motions with the shears and smiling, and I had the fantastic notion that there was something symbolic here. Delilah was shorn in her turn, and I feared her powers of resistance had gone with her hair.

"What do you think of me?" May said. "Doesn't it become me?"

She did have the grace to crimson.

"You must be mad," I said, hoarsely, and she told me not to be absurd.

Well, do you know, I did come, after a little, to see that that dark crown of short locks tumbling at her neck had in fact a maddening appeal. It gave a new twist to that ambisextrous something in her make-up. It brought out the boyish side of her character in such a way as to throw her inescapable womanhood into the most alluring guise imaginable.

I suffered—gad! how I suffered! I kept Syd company nights, in those vigils of his, and I had all but spilled my terrifying secret into that long moral ear of his, too. Secret? It was no secret to him. He had been a victim of the same disease, and contracted in the same quarter, too. I cursed the bashful delicacy that had held me off at arm's length and lost her to me to all eternity, it might very well be, for nothing, for no reason at all, except perhaps my too ethereal estimate of her character.

My days in the Neck-or-Nothing had become days of torture. An impulse would come over me to spring up, seize the rope, swarm out of that narrow cell, and surprise those two in the midst of a scene which would settle my status definitely, one way or the other.

Well, what you long for hard enough is usually pushed across to you by the logic of events, though sometimes in an altered guise. I did surprise them. I surprised myself as well, and the surprise left me as hideously in the dark as ever.

I had left the claim early that night to circle out around the flats and cool off. My hidden reason was perhaps to defer as long as possible hearing those bursts and volleys of target shooting going on in the canyon. You can imagine my disgust when I all but ran into their arms out there. Rolfe had hitched his old white horse into a buggy and they had been driving through that broken, spiny flat, looking for rabbits. That scenery was like scenery on the moon, or on some planet where everything had burned out, passion in-

cluded. But, standing stock-still behind a clump of cactus, I got good proof that my feet hadn't left earth.

You say it would have been the part of delicacy for me to take to my heels. I couldn't have, any more than if I had been buried up to the neck in sand by a gang of Arabs. May was on the point of getting down out of the buggy. She gave Rolfe her hand and jumped into his arms, practically. It was exactly as if one of those nasty long spines had been thrust into my heart. I felt a thin, ugly thrill, and it did seem as if the best thing I could do was to make a rash move which would expose me to May's merciful gun fire. I didn't do it, though.

Rolfe handed her the gun, and that old white horse stood as quiet as a lamb while May sighted over his haunches and banged away.

"Bagged him!" she cried. "A good thing, too. We certainly need the food over at our ranch."

The Australian retrieved the rabbit, and I heard May's heartsick little exclamation. The sound of that silver voice falling there in that arid waste was wonderful beyond description. What tore me, what mauled me as if I had had my head in the tiger's mouth, was the fact that it was not addressed to me, and not tinctured with sadness at my absence, either.

"How still it is!" she said. The old opening, you see. The whole flat conspired to waft those enchanted syllables into my ear. They were startingly clear, and yet my two principals were surely twenty or thirty yards away.

"Quiet, yes," Harry Rolfe said, and it was in that queer tone that led me on to guess that he had possessed himself of her hand and didn't know what to do with it. He pitched her a yarn about quiet nights in the wild Australian bush, in the back blocks, when any day or hour a man might be struck down with a poisoned arrow there in the northern territory. Yes, it was quiet—dark and lonely, too—along those river beds he was following. The only sound was the cheering of the cockatoos from the branches of blue gums.

"Were you hunting for gold?" May asked.

Yes, he was. He told her some weird tale about gold that harked back to the great days of Ballarat and Bendigo and Broken Hill, where the very horses that drew drayloads of ore into the big towns had their hoofs shod with gold instead of iron.

"Of course, that was before my day," he acknowledged.

"Hear the man!" May said. "Why, how old are you, Mr. Rolfe?"

"Twenty-nine," he said. "How old are you?"

I hung forward, with my lower jaw grazing the ground, because that was one of the big questions, really, and I had never had gall enough to put it to her. Rolfe had asked her outright, and without seeming more than normally interested, either. She didn't answer him, beyond saying that there were times when she felt old enough to be his mother.

"That may be," he said, "but there is some-

thing about you that invites confidences. Talking with some girls is like trying to light a fire in the rain, but it's not that way with you."

"I should hope not," May countered, and she laughed that light laugh of hers. "I always believe in being hail-fellow-well-met with everybody."

I missed the next interchange. They were getting decidedly more murmurous; but directly after that I heard May say, sharply, "Harry, don't spoil everything."

Spoil everything! Righteous Heaven! I felt as if a williwaw had overturned that flat. The ground billowed under me. He did spoil everything, too. A man certainly will see funny things when he hasn't got his gun along. He swept her into his arms with one overpoweringly sweet gesture. She didn't struggle. She had too much dignity for that. She didn't cry out, either. I don't suppose there was so much as a strain produced in the ether. Every ounce of opposition in that supple body had apparently departed with her hair, as I had feared.

She contented herself with saying, "Don't be—radical, Mr. Rolfe," in drained tones, but made no very striking effort to evade or break that hammer lock of his. Her head fell back, her lips parted. Pliant as a wand, she allowed that something passive in her, that harkback to the Sabine women, to have full sway. I remember her saying once that something has to happen, even in the world of the philosophers, and what happened was that she was kissed with that deliberation of approach that marks the master.

Then silence, and that silence stung and roared, and it was broken by May's saying in level tones, "I don't want to antagonize you, Mr. Rolfe, but aren't you going pretty far?"

Far! Far! She called that going far! A wave of something like visual sickness passed over me. I wanted to yell, throw myself on the ground, expire at her feet with a gash in my throat and a mute inquiry in my eyes. I wondered what she wouldn't give now to recall her rash indorsement of the hail-fellow-well-met principle.

He had surprised her, of course, but my point is that with her experience she might have divined what was coming. Why will sane women take these awful chances? She was no novice in the art of forestalling, generally. I know she had given me more than one bitter dose of preventive medicine.

She freed herself in a twinkling, be it said, and I waited to hear her launch some sharp invective against that man. I hung on her words, but she didn't utter them. She looked actually placid, except for a vivid touch or two possibly attributable to the oxygen in the air. Yes, she seemed to take that old careless view that had broken Syd's rest, that it was no use crying over spilled milk; ready at a moment's notice to let bygones be bygones. Was there something in that Australian's nature that had swept her off her feet for just that damaging second of time? Something impetuous and wild? Could she have hoaxed herself into thinking she was simply carrying on with some incarnated spirit of that desert she so

passionately loved? It may be so—it may be so. But you can well believe it was disheartening to me to see how she could wield herself like a spear in one breath and yield herself like a tribute in the next.

"I'm sorry you did that, Harry," was about the extent of her admonition; and he hung his head and fingered his hat and said, "I'm sorry, too," and he lied when he said it.

"You've learned something about yourself you didn't know, then," she said, in kindly tones, "and you've got to be on your guard in future, that's all."

Well, it's possible she was touched by the romance of the situation. I see that now, but at the time I thought it was as good as capitulation. How strange it is! Men fight their way a thousand miles for a breath of romance—as if it was air they must have it in gulping gulletfuls or die—but it swims right up to a good-looking woman's doorstep without her stirring hand or foot.

I met May at the supper table, and there wasn't a trace of that adventure in her eyes. You may remember Mrs. Gowdy's saying that May could wipe an equivocal expression off her face as smooth as you could do it with an iron. Trust a mother's insight. May was calm, but I knew that this day's fling had meant a little more than simply nothing to that girlish heart. I could infer that from her heightened spirits and the subtle patronage she extended to me. I make bold to say that I never knew what misery was till that hour, the misery of feeling young and

unsophisticated in the presence of the ravishing and the inaccessible and the devil-may-care.

I kept stealing glimpses at her and saying to myself: "The same girl! She didn't actually reciprocate, of course."

It was the slipshod toleration she had shown for that unsolicited caress that butchered me—May, the nonchalant. Presumably her viewpoint was—and she had told me herself that everything was in the viewpoint in this world—that happenings in that *genre* come and go and leave no scar; no cairn and no discovery monument is erected to mark the place by the perpetrator. Surprises like that don't oppress fatalistic souls unduly; and May's soul, I apprehend, was fatalistic; and yet I felt that she had been bit by a branding iron and that the imperishable, if invisible, mark of another man's brand was sunk deep into that lovely flesh—the weight of his gross shackle and the gloomy shadow of his psychic claim.

Strange, I hadn't felt it so in thinking over the lien that bound her to Jim Harper. But, of course, that load had been contracted for before she met me, and consequently couldn't know.

It truly was uncanny, and like watching her live another life in other circumstances and with other consequences. There was a weird quality of duplicated effort, too, as if her bright life were made up of quantities and quantities of new and delectable beginnings that kept her forever just dancing on the purlieus of adventure, throwing that entrancing shadow over the threshold of the heart's retreat, only to withdraw it on the instant.

I wasn't reassured at all to have old Sprowl lay a hand on my shoulder and growl, "Ain't she the handsome morsel?"

I had to say she was. She was a slashing beauty, with the limber temper of fine steel. She grew beautiful by study, I might add, as all the great masterpieces do—melting and earth-bound in some moods, defiant and aërial in others. I wouldn't have been surprised at times to see her stretch unsuspected wings on that aromatic wind and spirit herself away to the tops of those enchanted mesas and purple table-lands lying dark on the horizon. She had everything that a day-dream ought to have, and yet she was substantial, too, as she had said, herself, once. That rounded form of hers was a material glory. She had the upstanding quality and the wild fragrance of virgin timber and the physique of an immortal.

You'll have to forgive these rhapsodies that crop out every so often. I couldn't spring them on May, of course. I could scarcely talk with her any longer rationally. My throat would get dry and that question would begin to gore me that I felt I hadn't any right to put. And now I was suddenly as keen as Syd could be to dig Jim up and prop him up there glassy-eyed against May's tent pole. I wished him back with all my might—back out of that mysterious limbo he had dropped into so unluckily for all concerned. Did I hope to start an emotional back fire by using his defeated ghost as an incendiary? I can't say. He was a ghost, though, and he had all but lost his power to haunt, too. I brought him into our little talks by the

scruff of his impalpable neck; and May, who just a little while ago couldn't get enough of him, now let his limp shadow sink down at her feet forgotten.

In my desperation I screwed myself up to the point of asking Incarnación to tell me where Jim Harper was secreted—or wanting to ask her, for the fact is she had vanished. You'll understand that it wouldn't have been discreet for me to have inquired at the Empire for her, but I did everything short of that. I asked Uncle Peter Danforth out and out, and he put the back of his hand to his mouth just to say he hadn't seen her.

"She's up there with that bunch of cutthroats, most like," he hazarded, and I glanced toward the Organ.

There was a thin spire of smoke visible there. Uncle Peter tipped me a wink and showed enormous approval of me. Too late I saw how that fatal question would be interpreted, and I hadn't anything to buy silence with. I turned my back on that old philosopher, raging. I stumbled on over bowlders, through pools of water, blind, dumb, and I don't know where I should have got to if I hadn't felt a loop of braided rawhide drop over my shoulders as neat as wax, and tauten.

I thought it was Terrazas sure, and I must have jumped ten feet—only to hear May laughing at me. The little devil was only twenty paces off, astride that buckskin, all awry, and the lariat taken two or three turns around the horn of the saddle.

"This seems to be the only way I can detain you nowadays," she cried. She came up on me

hand over hand and dropped from the horse, a dancing point of light in her brilliant eyes. I felt like a clod.

"Bobolink, you precious thundercloud, can the grouch," she said, frankly.

Something let go in me, something snapped that had been wire-drawn and wire-edged already, and I turned and seized that fascinating head in my two hands and stared into those narrowing eyes as if I was estimating the shifting fires of twin blue jewels. I couldn't read that riddle, but I sensed that I was on soundings in among the shoals of petty passion, and I cried under my breath, "Don't let me take up time that your new pupil in barbering ought to have."

Wasn't that fierce? That reference to her bobbed hair was barefaced. It came out of me like the spit of flame out of a dry fuse, and I felt as if the explosion was coming that would rob my eyes of the sight of her forever. The pliant little witch bent away from me, dropped the loop at my feet, and there was wrath in her eye.

"What do you mean? Honest, Bob, I can't make head or tail of your psychology."

I was gratified, but not placated, by that evidence that she wasn't averse to pilfering from my private stock of words.

"You're altogether too willing to trust yourself to one night's ice, that's what I mean," I grated out. Her cheek reddened as if the sting of the lash had curled against it.

"I suppose," she returned, in withering accents, "your idea would be to have girls so that they

could be taken down mint new from some sweet-scented shelf at your pleasure."

It's a fact, that clever thrust went home. I did envy Pygmalion the solace of his Galatea, whose marble perfections and warm livingness he could not mistrust. Alas! they come to us now bearing in their eyes hints of past captivations and capitulations; they sting us with the sting of invisible lovers.

"You're just about as undecipherable to me as a hieroglyphic," May went on, "and if you think you can give me a lesson in early Egyptian manners and get away with it you're awfully mistaken, Mr. McCarty. This is the twentieth century."

"I ought to have known it," I hissed. "Well, even so, the time will come when you will have to choose which kingdom you will eat your bread in."

Stung to the quick and outraged in all her being, she drew her breath in sharply and whispered at white heat, with a trace of the viper herself: "For shame! Isn't there some new preparation for paralyzing people's jaws? You're quite impossible!"

I felt as if I must perish forthwith, as if some exquisite poison had been strained through the membranes of my heart, but I held on, notwithstanding.

"Impossible? I don't doubt that. Impossible, because I represent the past that you have broken with. Yes, broken with, and you can't deny it. Unhappy woman, just where do you take your stand? I came here to help you find a certain man —I suppose we can agree on that. I starve here,

tough out anything, share with you share and share alike, to help you find that man and find happiness, and now what? Well, now, when I have found him—"

"You have found him—found Jim?"

"You seem surprised. I don't know where to put my finger on you from one minute to the next. What is my position now? What is Jim's, for that matter?"

"Found him?" she gasped. "How do you mean —found him?"

May went from red to white, wax white, and gripped my mashed fist in her long fingers.

"I might mean dug him up, but I don't," I retorted. "He's very much alive and kicking, or was at last accounts."

"Have you seen him to talk with?"

I wouldn't lie to her, though I was sorely tempted to. I shook my head and ground out that I knew a party who did know where he was and would lead me to him on request.

"Who told you?" she said, faintly.

"A little bird," I sneered, and really that characterization of Inky wasn't so bad. It was more politic than to have named her.

"Where is he?" she pleaded, humbly.

There wasn't a shred of anger left in her. Her eye held nothing but conciliation when she begged me all but on her bended knees to disclose the extent of my knowledge.

"I know where I can lay my hands on him, and that's all I do know about him," I said, dully.

"What if—what if he didn't want you to lay

hands on him?" she suggested, timidly. "What if he didn't want any mortal man to lay hands on him at this time?"

"That's quite likely, in view of all the facts," I said.

"What facts?" May's voice had sunk clear to her shoes.

And I could only reply, "That's what I'm bound to find out."

May and I were unpredictable from the very beginning of our friendship. You combine certain chemicals and you get a result that you could have foreseen all along, a precipitate or a cloudy solution; but you knew in advance what was going to happen. It's not that way, I sometimes think, when the man soul and the woman soul grapple away there in some perfumed void. That principle of chemical affinity simply doesn't come into play at all. Instead, the laws of chance run riot, and your very life, sanity itself, may hang on some thread of whimsy.

The last thing in the world I was prepared for was to hear May gasp: "No, Bobolink, you mustn't disturb him. It's not your affair. Things are better as they are. Oh, I know how this will sound! You will put the wrong interpretation on it, and I can't help it. Won't you believe me when I say it's best all round not to—not to disturb Jim?"

"Disturb him?" I whispered, strangulated. "That's a strange word to lie in your mouth, isn't it? You're a strange girl. What are you here for? Don't you ever ask yourself that now? Why, I thought you were all wrapped up in Jim! Me—

disturb him? Cats! Why, I stood ready to drag him here by the roots of his hair, if it turned out that he had abandoned you, and now you apparently—"

"Hush up!" May said, choked, with tears in her eyes, bitter tears. "You have no right to take that boisterous tone with me. You may not mean to, but you wound me cruelly. Oh, Bobolink, dear boy, won't you take my word for it that there are some things that won't bear looking into—in this world?"

I certainly was willing to believe that, but she didn't wait for my rejoinder. She ran broken-hearted in among the catclaws at the foot of the trail and left those last words ringing in my ears.

I saw what May's dilemma was, of course. She had come all that weary way to marry Jim; she had even brought him to this pass, according to her own tell; and here she was, in the caldron again, heels over head in love with the Australian and making all kinds of long arms at him. Jim's specter might return to affright her, but Jim in the flesh could never be anything to her again.

I asked myself what kind of a figure of fun I must be to have slept through that interregnum, that magic time after her antipathy for Jim had set in and before the Australian had caught her fancy. Or had there been such an interregnum? Those two affairs might have butted, they might have overlapped. You've heard of lap-streaked courtships, surely. The thing was probably as simple as a shift of wind, and as inexplicable from the merely human standpoint.

I had often heard of these antipathies that arise after engagement but before marriage, panic terrors, aversions, disgusts, unbidden hatreds replacing the impulses of love in an eyewink. I knew one girl who for no reason at all that would hold water suddenly found that she couldn't bear the touch of her beloved's hand, couldn't abide his least glance, abominated his favorite flower, felt as if she must shriek aloud and stuff her fingers in her ears if she so much as heard him talking in the next room. And, mind you, all that reversal of mood had come in a twinkling while they were out shopping, picking out bedroom wall papers, I believe. If she had had a stop watch along she could have told you to the fifth of a second when that psychologic storm broke.

There was no help for it, of course. She had to go to him with his ring and tell him what had happened; and that great, strong man broke down and cried, she told a friend of hers later.

I could see at a glance that something like this had happened to May. One minute all on fire to receive Jim out of nowhere and press him to her heart, her tumultuous heart, and the next fearing his shadow, listening, quaking, for his footstep, full of subtle doubts, remorse, things bordering on misdemeanor, even. The mind is a perfect sluice, once the floodgates of the heart are opened. Anything is liable to hurtle through it—even the thought that it might be better not to disturb Jim, better not to bring the poor devil back to witness the havoc that another man had wrought.

And that very night May and I buried the

hatchet. I was sitting there moodily under a moon as lustrous as that mother-of-pearl moon in Black Dan's picture when May danced into my ken—literally—weaving back and forth across the flat in one of those æsthetic dances of hers. The chamber of commerce in one of the progressive towns she had worked in had voted money to teach working girls æsthetic dances as a method of breaking down barriers between the classes, equalizing the economic situation for women by the free inculcation of charm. It does give added poise, I suppose—not that May was lacking in that quality—and women seem to be more and more breaking into these spontaneous movements as a method of expressing what the heart can't utter.

It did do something to relieve the tension, I'll confess. May began with light, haphazard steps, fitful as the dawn wind, care free as a girl on a frolic, and these she followed with a little stiff Egyptian, as if she had slipped sideways from a bas-relief. Then a turn or two with that high knee action, arms broadcast, head nodding to the rhythm of that limber flicker of the leg that symbolizes joy, the joy of an earlier civilization, joy unalloyed and unconsidering and unrepentant, working up to mad abandonment, and as suddenly subsiding in a few of those short demure steps, odd and angular, a frown under her bang, Eastern magic in her eyes, and a hypothetical gold chain at her ankles.

What took the gimp out of me was when she unexpectedly came sidling in my direction. The moon glanced from those pallid arms that she held

straight out to me from the loose half-length sleeves of that jacket of white towel-goods with the broad leather belt of robin's-egg blue. She hovered, slim and serpentine, with a whole man-size mountain for a back drop and a desert for a stage, and I seemed to understand that this was the invitation to the dance.

"Come! You are the slowest mortal!" she cried.

I stood wonderingly and hesitatingly. She came into my arms straightway, like a dart, and we melted into the straight, modern, hot-cheeked, sway-backed, shuffle-footed stuff. By George! we were avid of it, and to all intents and purposes alone on the planet! Earth's breast seemed loosed from those binding frosts of civilizing instincts. The barren rock, the beaten dirt, the dead cactus breathed wild-sweet natural essences on us, and those plum-colored rock faces hung round like discreet curtains. Moments like that are what divide the quick from the dead, deponent saith.

Here, it's in the diary. I jotted down a sentence or two that same night, and I might as well pitch you those as try to carpenter others in my old age:

We were lost in the dark seduction of that blood-red waltz, which throbbed like the burning pulse of life and with a new and conquering audacity stole through the opening chambers of the heart, touching the thralled senses to an ecstasy of vision and of dream.

How secret and how proud the capitulation! How strange and silent the sanction to love unconsciously given by a dancing woman! It is a trance. The self-forgetful moment lives itself, and the cool austerity of waking life is dissolved as in a dream of sweet sur-

render, while to the wistful rhythm the gates of some dark eventful paradise draw back, revealing starry night or woodland glimpses, full of cool promise to the flushed cheek, full of incomparable fairy touches to the beating heart.

Stop for breath. There's no time like that time, is there, and no words like those words? I'm willing to acknowledge that I saw half magic in their pretty jingle at the time, and some of them actually came into my head while May was still in my arms. I had the curious thought that she had danced herself out of her own skin; that she had turned into another woman, still more resplendent, and, for that matter, that she held in her arms another man made for her delight by the skillful art that supervises these affairs. She danced and sang the music into my ear in that oriole's voice all the while, and I ranked her with those choice women made "to haunt, to startle, to waylay." Waylay! The poet's own spirit gust is in that word. What magic springs from its association with the impulses of a girl like May! She did waylay, seizing on a man and whirling him aloft on the strength of her own pinions, by the strong motion of her flowing soul.

It didn't last, more's the pity. By the gods! I can see her now, with that dance out of her system, as she said, panting, stilling her heart, leaning against the tent pole of her tent and smiling at me with the inscrutable Egyptian darkness still shadowing her eyes.

"Those old boys that put up for my education would have penalized me for making that use of it,

I suppose," she gasped. I got a ravishing glimpse of that interior, a sweet mystery, a nest out of my reach, a dainty little sulking place made of yellow Egyptian cloth. Nothing but May's sweet self to give that half darkness character, but it had character.

"Now have we danced it all away?"

"What?"

"That miserable grouch."

Her breast heaved uncertainly and the *lavallière* swayed, slid, and burned there.

"You've got me wrong," I faltered. "Little girl, I've only been thinking of your own good."

"And then they talk of one sex boycotting the other," May soliloquized. "That will never come to anything, will it?"

I said nothing. She looked at me from under level brows, and pleaded with me, "Won't you smoke the pipe of peace, my lord protector?"

She proffered me a cigarette, and I choked over it, spilling its fire, such was the wrought-up condition of my nerves. I associated that smoky taste with Inky's lips, with that fascination my bad angel knew how to exert, and a kind of wail went through my heart to see these other lips, a thousand times sweeter, so strictly fashioned into mere friendliness, so close, so maddeningly close, and yet, for a man constituted as I was, as far away as Egypt. For those were the days when I aspired secretly to be all things to all women, and I was therefore forced to shake my head doggedly to her whisper, "Won't you be satisfied with less than everything, the world and all?"

She looked at me with a half-mirthful light in the steady eyes and dropped out, as if letting me in on some delicious secret:

"It was that way with Jim, too."

I wanted to shout, "It's that way with Rolfe, if you come to that, or any man," but I swallowed instead—hugely.

"Jim?" I whispered. "I wonder you can name his name!"

She darkened and flashed at me, "Do you think you have the right to judge without knowing all the facts?"

"What are the facts?" I burst out, desperately.

Facts. About Jim Harper! I had had nothing but facts about that man. How noble he was, how good and how strong! He could sweep May in his arms, clear of the ground, as if she was nothing but a child, instead of being a grown woman. Not one of these hothouse specimens with knotty muscles, either. Jim's muscles were smooth-flowing. He was afraid of nothing, and that something wild in his make-up had May just the least little bit afraid of him herself, and she even liked that feeling.

Yes, Jim from having been a legend had come now to be more real to me than my blood brother. I thirsted to avenge him, and she bade me forget him and not disturb him. She didn't tell me the facts. Instead, catching sight of my mashed hand —I had been day-dreaming worse than usual, and it was clotted with blood from badly judged swipes at that drill—she caught it up and pressed the palm to her cheek.

"Can't you just trust me?" she whispered. "I

don't forget what you are doing. No girl in her senses could. Whatever you think, I don't forget. I haven't fallen that low. You ought to have everything that I could give you, partner."

Ought to have! I saw that she said that out of her great pity for me, because she couldn't give me everything, on account of the way she stood committed. I murmured something maudlin in my turn and walked away from her. It wouldn't do. She came after me. I heard those swift footfalls without turning round, until she plucked at my elbow—and then I whirled on her. The words died in my throat at her shamefaced aspect.

She said, just audibly: "Is it a bargain? No specialty shop, and you agree not to—not to look for Jim? Not to stir hand or foot? Not to give a sign even if people come to you and say—what isn't so?"

Lucid, wasn't it? In her desperation she was willing to throw a whole business enterprise into the scales against my silence, my inactivity. At any other time that submission of a proud woman to my will would have filled me with a rush of joy. As it was, I felt as if lead weights had been clamped on all round me, and as if some clandestine shade had descended on me. I was to be still the lord protector, toiling under the mountain and leaving her free to chain herself elsewhere—and I agreed. Even that pitiful crumb was more than nothing.

"I'll do as much for you some day, Bobolink," she breathed, and I thought bitterly that she could never do as much for me.

CHAPTER XVI

MEANTIME, of course, the rest of the world hadn't been standing still. Syd was going round like a man dogged by some secret society, and having frequent conferences with Mrs. Blendon. He wasn't speaking to me—it had come to that pass again—and he looked at me many times as if he thought I might defraud the dead if given half a chance.

As for old King Knute, he was a house divided. He preached blazing optimism and fell away into fits of black pessimism. He hungered after gold and equally he hungered after womankind. He had concentrated, too; had stopped writing that sweet lady friend in the South, and had eyes for no one but Aury Sprowl. He seized me by the wrist and groaned out that he saw her drifting away from him day by day, that beautiful spirit who did seem half willing to condescend so far as to embrace his destiny, if only he for his part could make out in advance what that destiny was.

"What he is waiting for is a smile of encouragement from a certain other girl," I told May.

"What other girl?"

"The Golden Girl."

"Oh, that!" May said.

She turned her back on me in disgust and left

me to pick up my water pails and journey toward the pump alone.

This pump was out in the branches of a big cottonwood, and the pipe was jointed and dropped down forty feet into the sands of the canyon itself. There was a little rustic bridge flung out from the rim rock into the branches of that tree, and the leaves were so thick that a man simply disappeared there.

I had no sooner put down those pails than May came flitting out there, too; and right away I got a renewal of that disagreeable impression of her being years older than I was in experience and in knowledge of the world. It was maddening. My notion was that she could probably count up a dozen men who had made love to her and been parried or put off with vague promises, for every girl that I had even so much as cast sheep's eyes at or been facetious with for half an hour.

But I was lost to reason again the instant I saw that dark, mischievous head come poking through those leaves. There was a sense of isolation and intimacy out there that was intriguing. Yes, sir, there was a song inherent in that tree, I swear, drawn up with the sap, and I felt for one ridiculous second as if we had built our nest there, and I even said so in a moment of exhilaration.

"We haven't feathered it, though," May said, quickly, and there was healing in the look she gave me. It touched the sore place like magic balm. I suppose she didn't mean anything by that phrase of hers—it was the demon of analogies at work again—but I chose to take it otherwise, and I felt

that premonitions of riches burning in my bones hotter than ever.

Everything just then seemed to conspire to urge me on into some piece of reckless audacity. May's face glowing there, with those green leaves palpitating at her throat, was the most urgent reason, of course. Her beauty seemed to wake up in me more and more a fragrant spirit of reminiscence and a consciousness of slumbering ideals. I felt as if I had attended on her footsteps at some prior time, and as if I could read her bodily into my past, and install myself at the heart of a romance that I had completely overlooked at the time. I couldn't believe the time had ever been when I hadn't been this near to May.

There is a kind of beauty, don't you think—you catch hints of it in the curve of a cheek, in the slope of a shoulder, or just in the sparkle of an eye—I say, it's a beauty which seems to have been selected by some deep impulse on the girl's part. It's less like a direct gift of the gods than an achievement of character. A beauty of the soul defined by substance, what? Power enough in a woman's face to launch a ship, as the old poet says. And what is the soul? Possibly, as the ancient metaphysicians used to say—I carry shreds of that theological college about me to this day—only a finer body within the body issuing from the lips at death in a silver thread. Manifested, if you please, in the warmth of the blood, in that mysterious gleam of the eye that beckons and repels like an alternating flash of red and white on a dangerous coast.

The siren gleam. I was right on the point of words when that gleam of May's got still more mysterious, and she put her finger to her lips and looked down through an aperture in that foliage. I brought my cheek close to hers, and we could see the floor of the canyon plain, and hear old King Knute coming along, singing one of his Swedish songs. The lucky Swede's golden hair was tumbled, he was covered with red mud, but the sparkle had come back into his eye and he looked burly and invincible.

He had stayed behind that night after Syd and I had left, because he wanted to paw round awhile in the shaft after the dynamite fumes had subsided. He came swinging down that lane of cottonwoods, shoving the burro, Yim, ahead of him, and he was as light-hearted as a crystal ball hopping on a water column in a shooting gallery.

By George! his throat was full of melody! He had translated that song for me, too, so I can tell you what it was all about. He sang that the golden sun sinking in the west, if it could know his love, would surely burst. Then in a refrain he subjoined that a thousand golden whispers would be wafted from it, whispering that one heart alone could light the world, since love was there. How is that for a song to have to lie buried in the Swedish language? And all he could say in English was that a certain amount of petticoats was good for the soul. It's a fact!

Yim went plodding ahead of him with a load of twisted mesquite on the pack saddle. That animal was white on its bottom part. It looked as if its

nose and belly had been dipped in whitewash, but it knew how to stem the current of events and had a chronic look of phlegm. It seemed to know everything, and at the same time to have sense enough to say nothing, like that ass of Sancho Panza's. For one thing, it had the priceless advantage of being outside the gamble.

What had attracted May's attention was more than all this, though. She had seen Aurelia Sprowl wringing out some clothes in a pool down there. We caught glints and gleams of those bronzed arms flattened against her sides in that twisting movement, and then we saw her straighten up and stand as still as a caryatid, with that red-fire dance in her hair. She was touchingly beautiful, by Jove! against that tragic desert background. The whole canyon was filled with low rays from a sun that was swarming blood red over those rhyolite cones that looked like a row of mystic alembics, and Heaven knew what might be brewing there. Through a rift in those stone walls the blue pipes of the Organ were strangely visible, and it seemed to me that it was at its devil's music, too.

We heard Clint say, "Whoa, Yim!" and the burro stopped. It had a kind of instant alacrity in stopping that must have been based on some inborn predilection for repose. That command was sweet, and it lowered its ears.

"I am a little early to-night," Tawgy said. "It's no good working in a shaft after the shot is blown. A man feels as if a cleaver had split him in twain. You see, that gas filters through the skin and quickens the heart action."

Aurelia murmured something, and I fancied that a light of reverie had come into her dreaming eyes. Every time she felt the slumbrous air of late afternoon quiver on her cheek she must have recollected that this mighty being was engaged in knocking imperiously on fortune's gate—a man not to be denied, a knock which shook the gate to its foundations, and still it stuck on those adamantine hinges.

Aury pressed one of Yim's ears to her cheek, but Yim received that caress, which would have unseated the reason of a man, without the slightest alteration of his features. He was like an animal cut out of wood, and there wasn't so much as a tremor even in the shadow his tail cast.

Suddenly Aury straightened up and fixed her eyes on Clint. That deep contralto of hers carried up to May and me like nothing at all.

"Tell me," she pleaded, "you do really and truly believe that you will find gold by going on down? It's not merely to encourage my father that you talk as you do?"

"Not in the least," Tawgy asseverated, stoutly. "I am as certain of it as I am that the sun will rise to-morrow."

"As that the sun will rise? You and father burn each other up like two seasoned sticks when they are crossed."

"Where is your philosophy for otherwise?" he shouted.

Aury had no philosophy for otherwise, but she murmured that she feared another disillusion would be fatal to old Dan. She put a hand on Clint's shoulder—she was nearly as tall as he—

and added, "It is almost terrible to me to think that he still hopes."

"Hope—terrible?" cried the optimist. He was amazed. Hope was meat and drink and raiment to that man.

"Hope in the heart is like the rainbow in the cloud," Aury said, sadly.

Clint replied severely that that was a false sentiment for a girl who was going to be worth millions in her own right—perhaps to-morrow. To-morrow would drop in a heap, wouldn't it, if it had to carry on its back the burden of all our hopes? Millions! To-morrow! It was fascinating the limber way his tongue curled around those two l's in millions. It was unctuous, and gave a savor of richness to his pronunciation of the word.

Aurelia spread her arms in a sudden fierce gesture, and flashed at him: "Millions! I can't abide the word! I have been hearing it for four years, and here I still am—in this tomb."

"You will not always be here," Clint breathed, devotedly. "If I shed every last drop of blood in my body—you have been a very brave girl—there are not many women—"

His tones got profound and indistinguishable. His emotion was so intense that he actually suffered a species of phonetic decay, I believe it's called, casting about in his mind for some manly and inspiriting phrase.

He couldn't find it, and Aurelia dropped out, bitterly: "I am slowly getting up to my neck in these millions. They seem to fall here as soft as snow in a calm."

That analogy was perfectly to Tawgy's taste. He looked into the atmosphere with shining eyes, as if a golden snow were veritably in the act of falling.

"Spiders had spun a web in the powder box again this morning," he said. "The indications are coming fine now, too."

"Indications!" the girl muttered, scornfully. "Look there!"

She pointed to a patch of moisture in the sand over which a dozen brilliant yellow butterflies were hovering. Every damp place in the canyon had its gathering of butterflies with wings like beaten gold, as if the very spirit of the gold were leaking out there to mock the eyes of men grown old and weary in the search.

"There is your gold," she said. "Everywhere where you are not, Mr. Clint."

Tawgy said, tolerantly, "Women are not good gamblers."

And Aury replied, more faintly: "I'm not so sure. The heart has its little chance to live. We gamble that."

And right there I felt that sudden pressure, brimful of meaning, of May's hand in mine. We had had our hands stuck fast together for I don't know how long, and our cheeks were glowing there within one of touching and tickling. I think she gripped me to point out for my slower comprehension that that dialogue had all at once heightened to a point where anything like betrayal of our presence would be impolitic, if not fatal.

For my part, I couldn't understand why Clint

wasn't already groveling in the sand and offering to abdicate the throne or do something morganatic.

Couldn't he interpret that sweet, broken utterance? Didn't he understand that that glorious desert woman was ready to fall at his feet? No matter why. It's enough to say that in a place like that even mediocre men have a scarcity value, as the economists say, like that of an antique coin of however small denomination. Why didn't he make the most of it? That cursed maxim of his about a certain amount of petticoats must have hung over him like the raven wing of destiny. He listened to some inner voice urging him to go slow. These optimists don't lack a saving fund of reserve in the pinches very often, and old King Knute did have a bump of caution raised up where experience had clubbed him. And, after all, it's true that when it came to pure economics he didn't have very much that he could call his own outside that bedquilt and a bundle of French saws and cleavers.

I remember, too, his having hinted to me that love was a torment and perhaps only a sort of shadow. Do you suppose he could have half divined that the delight to the senses is in the assault upon a mystery, and in the tremulous uncertainty of a man's reception into that new paradise?

May just breathed in my ear, "Don't dare to move!" and she took hold of me hard. Fancy looking down on a declaration of that sort, forty feet up a tree, with the girl you love to madness and beyond clinging to you and being every bit

as much affected as you were yourself. An opportunity like that wouldn't come once in a thousand years. I hung there wondering if I was the same man that used to chip out wooden minnows back in Dowagiac, and I couldn't think it.

King Knute, with his feet planted wide apart, was down there telling that massive girl, who was capable of oceans of fidelity to him, that women didn't embrace destiny as a man did. Wasn't that appalling? Didn't embrace—wasn't he destiny himself, in a substantial form, ambushed there and refusing to surprise her? What had become of the thousand golden whispers?

"When the critical moment comes they twist and turn half about and face the other way," old King Knute went on, earnestly, and he dropped out as an afterthought, as a sort of inspired analogy, "just as they sometimes refuse the arms of the man they love—out of pure whim, I often think."

I heard a tiny little dismayed hiss from May close in my ear, but it wasn't enough to drown out Aurelia's saying, "Quite likely," and they stood there staring at the pool at their feet. I wonder what that dish-faced Swede was thinking about. Taking his medicine, most likely, making a wry face over it, too. And yet that great-souled woman offered him everything for nothing.

"I hope you don't believe, as your sister does, that I have been guilty of deceit," Tawgy said, timidly, and Aury made a fierce movement of denial and cried:

"Deceit? Sometimes I think this canyon is

the tomb of deceit, and its ghost is all the time escaping." In a lower tone she added, "I had rather lose it all than mistrust you for one single heartbeat."

There was an almost heroic stillness in the poise of her body when she said that. May and I all but fell out of our tree to hear it, and we couldn't see anything for it for Tawgy but capitulation. We clung there dizzily, while a claustral grayness was stealing in down there, the fire dance going out of Aurelia's hair and a mysterious hush creeping over things, giving those implacable walls ears. They did have ears, it's a fact.

Well, he didn't capitulate, and I had known it all along. I knew well enough that if any woman in the world had the power to tie his wrists to his ankles, Aurelia was that woman; but I knew enough to doubt if even she could do it.

Clint had rushed in like a conqueror in those first days and overthrown her best defenses. Well, what then? You know perhaps that bitter moment of doubt and disillusion that comes to every conqueror when he sits among the smoking ruins and asks himself frankly what induced him to lay siege and whether it will be worth his while to rebuild. He has overwhelmed those reserves of mystery, gained the citadel, and all at once finds himself faced by those pale everyday necessities that haunt the seamy side of bliss and knock anything like lovers' gusto cold.

"What's got into the man?" May whispered to me.

I knew, as I say, that it was Tawgy's lack

of funds that had crippled his willingness, but I didn't say so then.

We went back slowly into the compound, and Syd rose up before us, long and sad.

"You heard the news?" he said, with a vindictive glare at me. "That Sheriff Maricopa has been next door to murdered in his bed, and it looks as if arrests would follow."

CHAPTER XVII

MY first feeling was one of huge relief, just as it had been when Maricopa himself had told me that Jim was only hanging by a hair. I hadn't realized until that moment what a burden I had been carrying in the way of that two-faced program that Maricopa had forced on me. Even in sleep, and just below the threshold of consciousness, had lurked that spiny figure of my sheriff trifling with his gun pocket and asking in those purring accents what I had done to justify myself as deputy. And I hadn't done anything and didn't mean to do anything; and now, praise be, I didn't have to do anything. Nobody knew of my obligation save Maricopa, and Maricopa lay at Madcap, toes up and his trigger finger uncurled, long and orderly and horizontal.

Such being the case, how came it that directly after this I set on foot that plan to lower myself into the Pandora? Maricopa, it transpired, wasn't hit as hard as first reports would have it; but he was incapacitated for a safe while. He hadn't been tackled in his bed, but down among the ore cars. He had tried to gouge out too many rustlers at once and one of them had dropped him. No, I had nothing to fear from Maricopa, and yet I had never been more inclined to help him. Everything pointed that way.

The morning after that little piece of eavesdropping, when May was serving up the scantiest fare we had seen yet, she said, with a wry face, "It looks like Washington at Valley Forge for ours, doesn't it?"

With a pang it struck me that she had grown thinner. She was suffering from that hard bargain I had driven with her. And what right had I to drive it? We were certain to find ore, you say; but I had lost some of my confidence. It seemed to me that the short cut to wealth now lay in an examination of that mysterious Pandora. The claim was well named. You remember that box of Pandora's, full of secrets that, when the lid was lifted, buzzed over the world and never could be coaxed back into the box again, and never will now to the end of time. Yes, Pandora was curious, but not more curious than I was.

Curious, and hungry too. Hunger is a mighty lever, even a mightier one than pure romance. Our table was all but bare now, and even May's ammunition nearly gone. The larder empty, and still that kitchen shack rang with optimism. The less we had to eat the nearer we drifted to that gold, it might appear. The more completely we beggared ourselves the more certain we were of our earthly reward.

To Clint, as well, I owed something; and perhaps the debt could not be paid better than to reveal to him that secret. My partner led his usual life of an optimist, waxing and waning. In the dead watches of the night he would tell me that he came into that canyon a happy, smiling man, with the

complexion of a girl. He used to sing before breakfast, and now he jumped out of his shoes if a pebble worked loose. He couldn't sleep, either. No one in that accursed canyon could sleep. Upon his word he believed that Syd was right and that murder had been done there.

Next day, when old Sprowl asked him how his courage was, with a side glance the lucky Swede replied, rigorously, "Like iron."

It was at those scant meals, those Barmecide feasts, that Clint was most radiant. He voiced all his hopes, banging the table with his fist and heaping up millions for us while we made motions as if we were eating. Old Sprowl, who knew that things were on a shoe string, scarcely ate at all.

"Let the young fellows have the food," he muttered. For days he fasted, and his eyes burned bright while his cheeks wasted.

Sometimes Azalea said, coldly, "Leave the dishes, please," after one of Clint's outbursts.

She always punctured him with a remark like that at a time when the tides of zeal had risen to their high point. He collapsed in his chair then. She was the bane of his life. Nothing delighted her more than to let loose those baying hounds of logic against the twinkling hare, optimism.

It was clear to Juan, the miner, that she knew what she was talking about, too. She had grown so thin that he thought she would soon die, and he declared that those whom death watches have clear brains. Consequently he refused to work longer in the Neck-or-Nothing unless it was timbered. That night Clint told Dan brutally

that he would have to abandon his claim for the time being.

"Abandon?" faltered the old seaman.

For an instant he sank back rigid, as if a stroke of paralysis had seized him, and then glared into the burning sky, where remotely several huge birds glided, circling, sleeping on ragged wings spread wide. Buzzards, his vultures, his aërial enemies, on whom he kept a wary eye, as if he and they played a watchful game with one another in which the winner was the one who could outwait the other.

"What's the matter?" he said, hoarsely. "Is your dynamite gone?"

"No," Clint said, "but I'm afraid of that soft rock, and so is Juan. I don't want to make that place my tomb, and I don't want to spare the time to sledge in square sets, either. That would mean timbers—dead work—sawing down cottonwoods—too much time."

"Don't abandon me," old Sprowl rasped. "You wouldn't abandon me, would you, when the next shot—the next shot, man—may be the shot that tells? As long as there's dynamite—"

"Certainly, dynamite," Clint returned, beaming again. "I'm not likely to forget that, and I'm not through with this canyon yet by a long shot. I've told you the gold is here, and, by the powers! it is here, only maybe we've been barking up the wrong tree. Well, it's never too late to mend, is it?"

"No, never too late—never too late—never too late," muttered Sprowl.

"All right. I'm going in under the Golden Girl in the morning," Clint said, with a light of triumph, as if he had been reserving this glad intelligence for a last convincing argument with the old fellow, and indeed Black Dan's eyes glittered, his lips worked, his brows, brushed on in broad strokes, rose flexibly, as if here was a solution that had been overlooked. The Golden Girl! Of course! Go in under it. This was better. Anything but abandonment. Abandonment was death. As long as he had an illusion of a pulse to his enterprise he was satisfied.

So he went into the tunnel under the Golden Girl and let the Neck-or-Nothing langush. But the heart was out of that for me. What was gold to me? The one nugget of it that had seemed priceless had been stolen away from me while I was asleep on my feet. I felt like one who had been fingering wishfully the stops of a rare instrument, only to have it snatched from my grasp and by careless gifted fingers stung into a voice and a rhapsody beyond my capacity to fathom or interpret. The Australian was that superior artist, of course.

One night I found May outside the compound, executing difficult underhand flings of that lariat of hers with a lithe twist of her body and a tumbling of her bobbed hair that brought that Australian between us like a dark apparition. I wanted to sink to my knees, confess my eavesdropping, and beg her to furnish some interpretation of those hard facts that would jibe better with my hopes. Instead of that I had my flash of illumina-

tion, came close up to her, and asked her rapidly and miserably if she did verily believe in the one-man-for-one-woman conception.

"One man for one woman?" she repeated. I think she was fairly halted for once in her life, and probably she was faced by whole multitudes of men that she couldn't help remembering gratefully. This reflection had its sting. "Certainly I am strong for monogamy," she said, and began picking up the dusty loops of that rawhide.

"What is your notion of an ideal marriage?" I said, walking along with her.

Without an instant's hesitation she answered: "That of the Sabine women. It took them by surprise, and that's how it will have to take me, if it overtakes me," she said, proudly.

"You can't mean that!" I cried. "It's simply too haphazard!"

"This life is haphazard all the way, Bobolink," May said, and she touched my wrist as if to arrest me and hold back the avalanche. It didn't avail her.

"Haphazard, yes," I rushed on; "but there is destiny in it, too. Do you think, when a woman is once actually married to the man she loves, or is engaged to him, that she could ever have been happy with another man?"

"Of course she could," May laughed. "I've seen shoals and shoals of men that I could settle down with at a pinch, and probably be happy with them, once I got acquainted with their ways. You know that old adage about there being as good fish in the sea, don't you?"

"You don't believe in the from-all-eternity-to-all-eternity proposition, then," I advanced, feebly.

May answered tartly that she had all she could do to keep abreast of the from-the-cradle-to-the-grave idea, and I believed her.

"Spring it, Bobolink," she said, looking at me gravely. "You're holding something back, old-timer. Don't keep me in suspense."

So then I told her that it seemed to me that every Simon-pure romance had been predestined, and that thousands and thousands of little causes had to contribute to the great glowing culmination. The germ of the thing could lie in a drop of rain or a puff of wind, in a predestined whisper or a flash from a dark eye. For that second or fractional part thereof the image of forsaken Inky loomed there reproachfully. And once that little shove was given, it went on unfolding and expanding and jumping fences and moving across lots at lightning speed; but just at the start it demanded sacrifices on the part of a good many people who wouldn't figure very largely in the final fructification.

"Yes, but whose romance, my Bobolink?" May asked me.

It was a bold question, and it did nearly bring down on her unsuspecting head a fervent answer. I was burning to say: "Yours. Yours and mine, little May." Why didn't I? But I procrastinated.

There must have been something patronizing in the slant of that dark head, and I brought out, desperately, "Clint's—my partner's. He will never marry her unless he finds that gold."

"Then he is a small part of a man, is all I can say," May said. "But why all this philosophy, my bonny prince?"

I narrowed my eyes and whispered that it was evidently for me, a man outcast and unattached, an adventurer, in short, whose life was habitually on a shoe string, so to speak—it was my part to pick up the ends of their two destinies and splice them together where they lay severed.

"The first thing he knows she will get out of hand," I urged it on May. "She won't see all this hanging back from his angle."

"What woman would?" May answered, shortly. "But just how good are you at splicing, may I ask?"

"In this case the remedy is sudden fortune, I happen to know," I went on, "and I'm going to see what I can do for them."

"You?"

"That same! I'm going into the Pandora—tonight."

"The Pandora!" May breathed. "It's three hundred feet deep!"

I acknowledged that, but I argued that if I boggled at that my reputation for intrepidity wouldn't stand very high.

"Nobody that once knew you would ever question your personal courage for one second," May said, softly. "But it's so much better than your judgment."

I felt that rapier flash of romantic approval dart from her woman's eyes, pierce, and withdraw, and it seemed as if my heart's blood gushed forth then.

"You certainly need a guardian, you mad, mad boy," May said, and faced me squarely and put her hands to my shoulders. "What won't you think of next?"

I reached up and took her two wrists and put them slowly away from me with a renunciatory gesture—where had I seen that in operation before?—and I turned half away and said, "I can try, and try never was beaten, the old fellow says."

"You're not going to do anything of the kind," May said, and her eyes snapped. "It's perfectly outrageous! It isn't expected of you!"

I felt a dryness in my throat, but merely whispered, "Watch my smoke!"

I explained to her rapidly my conviction that the Pandora was a secret spigot that tapped the riches of the Sprowl estate, and that the gold was being taken out from under our very feet. Who knew? It might be the very gold that would carry Terrazas into Mexico, rally his armies again around him, and raise up that deadly viper's head of revolution that would surely force intervention and the deaths of thousands of good men.

"It's too big. I can't get that theory all inside me," May said, with a trace of satire.

Suppose I had told her in so many words the part I had been assigned to play with Inky. Could she have got that inside her, I ask you? A woman's benevolence has to have a personal object, furthermore, don't you think? They don't dwell on the big, universal themes, somehow. They look at things in the concrete. We've got to remedy that somehow by education.

May did come down off her high horse after a little, but she didn't get my point of view from first to last. She told me not to make a fool of myself for people who probably wouldn't lift a hand in my behalf if the shoe was on the other foot.

"Lift a hand?" I repeated. "Where is the question of lifting a hand involved? As far as I go, it's all one whether I sink or swim, now that you are in safe hands."

By George! May was indignant with that point of view, and went from red to white in an instant. Well, I did play fast and loose with the major emotions that night, and I admit it. I took the part of a lonely outcast who meant to stake everything in one generous adventure that would result in making two people happier at least, and without their ever knowing the extent of my sacrifice, either.

"You've no right, not the least in the world, to take that attitude," May said, hotly. "It's simply intolerable in one so young to be so cynical about his own chances. Why, it's positively suicidal!"

In one so young! The skin crawled on my neck. I fought for utterance, but May was beforehand with me.

"Why not let him go down and see for himself, if everything hinges on it so?" she blazed out.

It was my cue to tell her then frankly that there was a considerable element of risk attached. The shaft was deep. The rope might be rotten. Then again Los Huesos—Bones—might not care for that sort of intrusion.

"The man that makes the try has a good chance to get a red shirt out of it," I said, and that phrase of Maricopa's sounded picaresquish in my fond ear. I hadn't the faintest anticipation of getting one, really, but my fancy loved to trifle with the gory prospect.

"A red shirt!" May repeated, pale as death. She had all that technic at her tongue's end, of course.

"That's the secret reason why Clint holds off," I said. "Aurelia won't let him attempt it. But, don't you see, that's all the more reason why some one unattached should make the try; some one—like me—with a debt of gratitude to pay off. That man took me up when I might have fallen down and died for lack of food and a kind word."

"Don't!" May cried, in a stricken voice.

Her eyes were starry when she clung to me and asked me if I had reflected that if I wouldn't spare myself, at least I owed it to somebody who was waiting for me somewhere, somebody to whom I was destined to come to mean everything, not to take unnecessary risks.

"So you are coming round to the one-man-and-one-woman idea," I put in, maliciously. "You will be telling me next that marriages are made in heaven."

I had angled for this moment. Gad! how I had angled for it! And May threw away her best defenses and said yes, perhaps they were—who knew?—and it was not for her to say. She was getting more malleable every second in that forge fire I had thrust her into. Those eyes of hers were

just a blue dazzle. They had steel points and dancing lights in them, and there was something enthralling in that pal's grip of hers. This outdoor life had been imperceptibly conditioning her and modeling her, and now she was right down to the essentials, slim and strong, and every movement of her bewitching body had that romantic significance, that sidelong grace, and that *élan* which are the despair of inferior women; that something sympathetic and adaptive in the flesh. She was all necessary to herself, as Joe Carney would have said if he had been on the ground; and those little neck triangles she displayed when she turned her head were superbly chiseled.

"Sometimes I think you are the original horn-in artist, truly," she dashed at me, and I made some queer gesture, but hung to my point of view.

"I guess everything is viewpoint in this world, just as you say," I answered. And May, with an odd sound in her throat, cried at me, "There's more truth than poetry in that, if you did but know it."

Jove! I never shall forget that moment! The moon was coming up over the scrub oak in whose shadow we were standing, and I saw a star hanging in midheaven off the horn of Triangle Mountain. A pearly mist was shrouding those black declivities, and now and then one of those revolutionary cattle that Terrazas had driven over from Sonora would moo, and it sounded like a sad, rich horn being winded by a dying outlaw.

It's absurd, but there certainly is a wild, romantic strain in that cry of a cow in the desert when

she's on her peck. It's hungrier than the deep notes of a violin, and with better reason.

There's no denying, either, that I had been touched with that magical ray which gilds, which transforms. Yes, by Mars! I had been caught in that draught from the infinite which makes a sane man nothing but a whirling ground for vaporous emotion, and I felt that nothing would do May and me so much good as a rapid scurry across the ether fields.

"I suppose you call this fatalism," she sighed, and I admitted it, and accused her of fatalistic tendencies, herself. She admitted it partly.

"That is," she qualified, "I believe we were put here for a purpose, but what that purpose is we don't know."

I might have enlightened her, but I felt bashfully that the time hadn't come. What was there about that girl that reached out and clamped to my windpipe every time I thought of something fundamental to say? I simply gloomed and agreed. I told her a little huskily that I had given up all hopes of personal success in this world; I was an empty shell, a husk. I had thought of life at one time, it was true, as an ascent of golden stairs, or like a sort of glorious scroll that was being unrolled for me to walk on step by step by the invisible hands of the fates and the furies. But of late everything was dust and ashes, phantoms. I went so far as to tell her that I had the phantom touch, and that I had only to reach cut my hand and all those mountains would sink into the dust.

"I dare you!" May cried, in ringing tones, and I retorted, lamely, that I didn't want to.

"It's the most depressing line of chatter I have listened to in many a day, I know that much," May cut in. "Perfectly morbid, in fact. Come over to the tent and have a comfy little smoke and then go turn in like a good boy."

"I don't think you have ever quite understood," I muttered, choked. "No, there's work for me this night, little girl. Well, wish me luck."

I held out my hand, thinking that in another minute I should be picturing her as standing where I had left her, drooping, her heart throbbing and tears dimming her eyes, maybe, at the splendid folly of that undertaking. In place of that she whirled and ran full tilt into the shadows where her tent was pitched.

I stumbled down the canyon trail, thinking that everything had come to nothing through that one act of hers. And will you believe it, I was no sooner on the floor of the canyon than she faced me in that darkness, floated up to me, actually collided with me. She felt like a cool and velvety young solid, and I was surprised to find so much clear substance poured into that slender mold. In our dances she had swayed to a touch, been all ethereal.

To my cry of pure surprise she laughed. "I slid down the water pipe, Bobolink." She looked close into my face and said, tensely, "If there's any likelihood of a red shirt, this is going, too," and tapped her gun pocket significantly.

She had gone back and strapped that thing about her waist for my protection!

"I don't need that," I whispered. "Go back like a good girl."

"Then come back with me," she said, and I wouldn't do that.

The upshot of it was that we moved on together, my little gun fighter and I. Such was the inauspicious start of my hand-forged opportunity to grow to the stature of the Australian in May's eyes. She didn't know what she wanted the man of men to do, and, by Jupiter! I meant to show her!

The Pandora's headgear, raised over the mouth of the shaft, was made of heavy hewn timbers, the butts projecting from the eaves of a temporary roof. This headgear has another name—the gallows frame—and my heart sank when I saw it. I had that temporizing or procrastinating instinct to walk past it on some pretext or other and defer the descent.

I took May's arm just above the elbow to enjoin silence and absorb courage, and we crept over toward the Empire and looked in. There was a kind of conclave going on in there, but on account of the catclaws swarming under the windows we couldn't get close enough to hear, and at first I could see nothing but the portentous countenance of General Terrazas glooming in the light of one of these long blue candles. He looked like a dethroned monarch. He had that dark, proud look of a glorious exile about him, as if he had lost something—a continent for choice.

You remember that Spanish ballad that says, in effect, "Yesterday I was King of Spain; to-day

I am King of Nothing." Terrazas looked as if he might have stepped out of it. There was certainly an imperial quality adorning that pock-marked, pot-bellied little reptile, with his campaign hat in tatters and his blue-black mustaches twisted into twin spires.

By shifting along a foot or two I caught a glimpse of that genial specter, Los Huesos—Bones. He was standing there in that attitude of silent expectancy that was usual with him. What was he waiting for? He had the look of a man lying in wait, of a man waiting for his enemies to hang themselves at the ether end of an invisible rope which he kept paying out to them, and right away I saw that one of the men at the end of this rope was Sydney Hecker. Can you imagine it? So this was what Syd was doing with his evenings. You could have brained me with a ladies' fan, as our ancestors used to say, when I caught sight of poor Syd sitting there on the edge of one of those cane chairs, pale as death and with great circles under his eyes from lack of sleep. Had he sold us out? But what had Syd to sell? Was he offering his services to the opposition camp? I could imagine him asking them in that husky whisper, "Is it legal?" and getting back the same answer I had given him, "Legal as breathing," only this time with the significant wiping of a bony finger across a lean throat.

I craned my neck and made out just back of him, half in shadow, the enigmatical figure of that Sebastian Polhill, sitting there perfectly inert, as usual, like a stuffed figure.

I half carried May back into the darkness with her two elbows in the open palms of my hands before she could see Syd. I was afraid she couldn't keep that secret, and I wanted it a secret until I knew more about it. I felt truly sorry for poor Syd. More than ever he looked sick and out of song, and I felt that if he kept on as he was going he would be beyond the reach of any mortal song restorer before many moons.

"My heart is in my mouth," May whispered to me. "What is in the wind, do you suppose?"

"You would come," I said, bitterly. "I told you this was no errand for a woman."

"Wait till you hear me complain, will you?" she whispered then.

She told me later that that feeling of dismay passed clear to her knees like strong drink, and nothing but the sight of my set face had held her back from picking up her skirts and making a run for it. As for myself, I looked upon her as a fair white curtain, hung up where I could see myself shadowed there many times as big as life.

Glancing over her shoulder, with one arm around her to steady her, I could just see the outlines of the gray dump of the Neck-or-Nothing beyond, an integral part of the Sprowl estate, and separated from the Pandora by nothing more substantial than a mathematical line.

These patents are given *ad cœlum*, *ad inferna*, you know; they extend, that is, perpendicularly from hell to heaven. The government is nothing if not generous.

I couldn't put off clambering into that black

shaft any longer. Whatever deviltry might be lurking there, I stood committed a thousand ways, and May was waiting for me. If the guests in the Empire should get wind of this trespass I was certain to be caught like a rat in a trap. If anyone came by at the right time the creak of the windlass drum would betray me. To guard against that I pressed into May's hand a little bug light.

"If anyone comes flash that," I whispered. "Can you look out for yourself then?"

"What would you bet to the contrary?" May asked, pithily, and I wouldn't have wagered much. Both her hands closed over mine when I gave her that light, and they were cold as ice.

"Think twice," she whispered. "It isn't too late even yet."

I said: "It's all right. I have the phantom touch, don't forget," and I began to let myself slide.

I wasn't lacking, of course, in that instinctive fear of narrow spaces which all men carry to the tomb, and the native heat of earth pinched my lungs tight before I had gone a hundred feet. A smell of dank fungus choked me, too.

Gad! the phantom touch wasn't very much in evidence on a rope that began to feel more and more like a red-hot bar! I wondered whether it wasn't the fool in my breast that had dictated a fair half of that philosophy of disillusion that had got me into this predicament. Wouldn't it have been better for me to imitate Clint, swallow the universe at one gulp, and leave it to the involuntary man within to digest its inconsistencies?

But right there, when I hung dangling, I heard those pet words of his ring close in my ears, "Go—on—down," and I dropped another fifty feet. Then, with my head lolling on my shoulders, I saw what looked like the flash of a firefly about a thousand feet in the darkness above me. May's signal!

By George! I was visited by a sense of utter disembodiment! I was panicky, right, and it was by the merest chance that I managed to hook my toe into a crack between two loosened planks in the side of the shaft. I twisted my leg, and the plank fell in with a clatter. There was a space behind it.

I crawled in there, expecting to hear that rope rattling the shaft, and I felt rather low and less adventuresome than formerly; but nothing further happened on that side. But while I was sitting there in blackness, with my chin on my breast, a current of air, coming from what I supposed was the dead end of that drift, touched my cheek. I sprang up and cupped my hand over the reflector of my carbide lamp, spun the flint sharply. As soon as that needlelike jet of flame shot out I saw my situation plainly. I was in the acute angle of a ragged, wedge-shaped cave with a bad-looking roof which only cleared my head by a few inches. It sloped upward, though, and at the far end I saw a ledge of solid stone rising to a height of ten feet, with a centipede ladder leaned against it. The upper end of that ladder was thrust into a hole in the rock large enough to admit the passage of a man's body.

I took the lamp in my teeth and went up that ladder and dragged myself through that hole,

when I found myself in a second cave bigger than the last, with smoother and more workmanlike walls, which showed traces of some kind of mining.

Then I saw that this stope was connected with one higher yet by means of an immense black log with steps cut in its front face. I put my thumb into the lowest of those steps and found it worn smooth as glass. The solution came to me in a flash. These steps had been worn smooth by the rub of innumerable bare feet. I had got into an ancient Mexican working, one of those untimbered mines hewn from the rock by the aid of tempered copper tools alone, without the aid or knowledge of blasting powders, by the use of the bar alone—*el barreno*.

Was this, then, the secret of the Pandora? I was all agog, and I was getting ready to worm my way farther yet up this mysterious back stairs when my eye was caught by traces of a sluggish trail on the ground, the kind of trail that might be made by dragging a heavy sack. Right on the heels of that I picked up a piece of fairy quartz.

That's no receipt for slowing down a rapid pulse. I stood stock-still, staring at that fragment with the yellow vein twisting through it, and I had that consecrated feeling Clint had had so many times, I fancy, only now with the blinding dazzle of triumph in it. I had laid hold of the yellow metal itself. Gold!

It's a fact, I only needed to lift that lancelike flame an inch or two to see the termination of that trail in a row of bulging canvas sacks leaning together there against the hanging wall of the stope

with every hall-mark of treasure-trove in their bulky rounds.

My knees joggled together, sweat jumped out on me, I was dizzy; and I began to fear I would have to get down on my hands and knees and crawl up to that weight of treasure; but I did just manage to totter over there and jerk open the mouth of the nearest sack.

Yes, the native metal. You couldn't any more mistake it than you could mistake the first approach of love. The real thing! I tore at it with my hands until my finger ends ran red, gashed by those shining matrices. I hefted the sack. Its weight was terrible and miraculous, and I told myself that May and I would never come to want now.

Raw gold! It hadn't even been put through a stamping mill, but stood there just in the shape in which it had lain after those terrific crucibles below had emptied themselves, and earth pressures had squirted it into these seamy crystals. Those few bits that I picked out of the quartz resembled the odd, sprawling shapes that small quantities of lead assume when thrown molten into cold water. I should say it must have been three-quarters pure gold, and I knew at once, of course, that it had been stolen from the Neck-or-Nothing on its lower levels.

Right on top of that a wave of mistrust swept over me. I was afraid I was dreaming. There certainly was a kind of treacherous insecurity in that vision, and even in the taste of the blood that was running off my finger ends, and in the awful

grayness that seemed to be falling on things, oozing out of those rock walls.

I remembered that I used to have dreams that matched this one when I was a boy. I lived then near a big stamping company that made coal hods and punched out divers articles from galvanized iron. Their dump, out back of a big red fence, was heaped up with small circles of tin and sheet iron the size of quarters and half dollars.

Well, in my young dreams I used to visit those premises, and that scrap metal would all have turned into silver coins. It's a fact, I've spent the better part of a night raking those miraculous coins into a burlap bag with a foolish gladness in my heart that comes to anybody who finds himself in the act of getting something for nothing; yes, worked like a madman, carted the loot carefully into our potato cellar, and locked the door each time—and then been shut out from the fruit of my labors simply by opening my eyes on the jeering light of day. It's an awful sell, really.

I hung there over those gold sacks, feeling richer than ever before or since, and I put three or four big nuggets into my pocket to feel the bulge and sag of them, all the while trying to think of some way to save myself the shock of some such frightful disillusion as I have described, and it got darker and darker and less real. Fantastic bas-reliefs began to loom out of that rock. I simply stared.

I don't know how long a time passed before it occurred to me that my carbide lamp had got clogged, but when it did the flame was a mere pin prick. I stood up; my legs felt cramped, my eyes

had blurred, I couldn't see two feet ahead to distinguish outlines; but it was precisely then that I got a notion into my head that I was not alone. Was it only part of my disordered fancy, or did something shadowlike seem to cling to the rock at the point farthest away from those bags of treasure—something hanging there like an enormous bat, with wings extended? I couldn't see the glimmer of an eye, I couldn't hear a sound; but in the condition of my nerves I was jolted as hard as if I had been hit by a high-powered bullet.

I remember thinking, "It must be my jinx," because it's certain I did have such a creature in attendance on me in those days, and right on the heels of that I got the still more panicky notion that here was the keeper of the mine. My instinct was to plunge upward madly, and I gave full rein to it, without stopping to reflect that when I came to go down again that hallucination or phantasm would be blocking the way again.

The jouncing I gave the light jarred that obstruction out of it. I jammed my body through a last little fissure where the vein had pinched out, and found myself in a stone chamber with a flight of crude stone steps blasted in the rock. I stumbled up, too scared to give a thought to the oddity of these steps or the trapdoor at the top of them. At any other time I would have used caution in thrusting up that trap, but the shivers of pursuit were running through me. I had that feathery feeling about the knees of a little man being chased by an ogre in a dream, and I bent my head and shoved up with all my might.

I burst out into the interior of some sort of adobe shack. Surprising, yes; but I hadn't really time enough to palate it. By the light of one of those long blue candles that I associated with General Terrazas's brooding face I saw a rough wall, two or three great iron spikes cemented in it, a Mexican saddle hanging from one of these, and a heap of Mexican cheeses on a wooden shelf.

So much for that first instant. In the next a naked arm slid against my neck and I was borne backward in a strangle hold.

I have never come nearer having my heart stopped through sheer panic terror, because I thought that black keeper from the Pandora had followed through and jumped me. I had a moment of horrible disgust, too, at the pliant softness of that arm, I remember—just a flash—and then that feeling was turned into one of intense exhilaration by a remarkable discovery I made, a happy discovery that seemed to flood in through my pores and be intuited even before I could feel that very material wiry black hair stinging my eyes and divine that I was in the grip of General Terrazas's wife.

Incarnación!

That softness ceased to revolt me on the instant, I might add. And still, do you know, I was so enchanted by the rigors of that novel embrace that I was tempted, embattled as I was, to hold up my end, to put forth a little strength playfully, only to find that she had me in her vise with one deft motion of her supple body. Her cheek was hard against mine, and I felt that necklace of hollow

silver beads slide on her breast. She had got her knee in the small of my back, you understand, and she followed that up with a straight billiard thrust on the spinous process that resulted in a crack like the report of a pistol and a swarming of blood in my ears. It was rock-bottom osteopathy, and it had me feeling like another man in no time.

All this was only a matter of seconds. I don't believe there ever was sheer rippling sinuosity to equal Inky's. She could be all legs and arms when she chose. I found myself lying back on a crumpled lion skin—I had lost my balance stepping on the creature's head—and Inky was standing over me, breathing deep, and a more brilliantly beautiful thing it's seldom been my privilege to see. That struggle had fanned up all the banked fires of her being. They glowed through the skin and set up a strange, deep, dusky shining in those receptive eyes.

"Roberto?" she whispered. "You—veritably?"

"Incarnación!" I answered in that same whisper, and with the first use of that satin tongue of hers I had again my former strange, uplifted sense of having got through the wall. Inexplicable, isn't it? Through the wall! Strayed into that other world of teeming fancy, just as if a fatal break had been effected in the chain of everyday causes and effects; just as if May, my beautiful May, wasn't waiting, finger on trigger, there at the mouth of the Pandora, every fiber in her tuned for the footsteps of my enemies; just as if words previously spoken and hopes previously roused had

been spoken, roused, in a delicious dream of which here was the waking half fulfillment. I can't do justice to the thought in words, of course, and the thought itself I hardly formulated at the time. I merely accepted it, just as I accepted air, and the tonic qualities that seemed to stream from Inky.

"I knew that you would come," she murmured, in that voiceless whisper. "I knew that you would find me, my Roberto."

She knew! I had been thrown into a slight fit of abstraction by seeing from the appointments of the room that it was Inky's sleeping quarters. The low bed had a red blanket stretched across it. This blanket lay opened diagonally, and my eye leaped suddenly to Inky's bare arms, her bare shoulders, the thick stream of unbound, unbraided hair swirling at her neck. She had been asleep.

And only then did I pause at that puzzling circumstance of the chain. I had heard it clink, to be sure. I had felt its cold links scrape across my face in the instant of coming to grips, but I had supposed she was using it to make a captive or me. I saw now that it went about her wrist and that it was Inky who was captive.

"You are chained!" I whispered.

"How otherwise should I have been absent from you?" she retorted.

It's a fact, in my early youth women had to be chained away from me. I followed up that chain link by link, and found it doubled round a staple cemented into the wall.

"What the devil—" I began, but Inky laid a

finger to her lip and gave a cautioning look at the door. I stood stock-still, and for the first time I did hear a hoarse murmur of voices. Inky bent swiftly at the limit of her chain, replaced the trap, threw that lion skin over it. I made a quick guess that I was in the Empire Hotel, and I was right. This room had been built on to take advantage of that abandoned working as a hiding place for gold, a secret exit from the guilty shaft of the Pandora. More than likely the Pandora had been driven down to meet that ancient working, with the idea that if gold should be discovered in that promising claim, the Neck-or-Nothing, it could be conveyed away secretly, without ever appearing at the mouth of the main shaft. Hence that look of neglect and dilapidation about the headgear of the Pandora.

"Terrazas!" whispered Inky. "He will kill you! What if he has heard already?"

Well, what if he had? I could imagine his coming and thrusting his face into mine, twisting up those mustachios, grinning like a gorilla, and hissing, "My house is yours," thinking all the time that he was giving me what I had got already. The butcher!

I got a scarlet flash of that scene, and in the same flash I saw proud Inky sinking to her knees, her faithless knees, on my behalf, lifting her chains and swearing by the cross that there was no more wax than what burned, and that it would ill become her to wear a shirt of eleven patterns. In vain! In vain! The hand of that enraged husband went to his hip; followed bright flashes,

hissed recriminations, spurts of flame, staccato barks, jets of blood, and the spat of lead pellets on insensate stone.

And Maricopa's genial ghost hovering there in one corner, with a hand to that tawny mustache and an approving nod at me as I was swaying there and sinking to the ground, with that hideous sense that there can be such a thing as exceeding one's instructions. May seemed to be there, too, bathed in tears, and it seemed to me that for the first time she understood—she understood.

I swung round the circle of my pet ogres in a flash and got back to a consideration of Inky. She had bared the exquisite round of her shoulder to me, shrugged it out of that shift deep enough in one breath for me to see a livid bruise, the purple marks of five sprawling, pudgy fingers.

The picture was seared on my brain of that desecration of a pale shoulder whose touching mellow lines flowed so sweetly down. And you can understand a little of that great swelling of pity in my callow breast when I tell you what she told me then, close in my ear—that she had got those cruel marks in consequence of her intervening in my behalf and terminating that weird struggle at the Empire. In her leap into the dark she had left one of her slippers behind, and Terrazas had come to her later filled with that emotion alluded to by May as a ridiculous disease, tortured her, and chained her up.

"What did I care?" Inky whispered. Her long fingers closed over my wrists. "I knew that you would come for me, Roberto."

She knew! How did she know? I felt as if she had sunk one of Clint's slaughtering knives into my heart to the hilt and reamed it round and round. She did cut the heart out of me with that appeal. I remember feeling at the time that fatal consequences might attend the impulse, it's true; yet I couldn't help stooping swiftly and kissing that bared shoulder—twice—thrice. Reverently, I protest, I was on the point of tears, but she misinterpreted the act and closed her eyes.

It was like a dying echo from the song of songs. I was lost to reason then, of course. I forgot everything—what was expected of heaven or feared of hell, as Walt Whitman says. I crushed her to me, and that was a saga in itself. Man! I couldn't have had an inkling of the power there was in that supple back if I hadn't put it to the test! She didn't appear to have a bone in her body. She seemed awfully sinuous and acquiescent, and there was no more force in those arms then than in those of a girl of ten. Chivalry nowadays is all that keeps many good men from finding out that women are physically their superiors, and even chivalry is falling through, except in outlying parts.

And while we stood there shilly-shallying, precious time was getting lost in among the velvet trances. I can't say how much, but I was recalled to myself and the perils of the situation by Inky's putting her hand to my cheek and turning my head so that my ear came broadside on to that cloth-covered door. That murmur of voices at the other end of a long corridor had grown more

distinct, syllables of that orotund Spanish were distinguishable. Terrazas himself was in the passageway. Terrazas the terrible!

That would have given any man pause, wouldn't it? It did me, I know that. I felt Inky slip from me. I noted the lithe progress of her tense body along that adobe wall. She stood out in high relief in that candleshine, and there was more than a touch of the tigress there, there's no gainsaying that, and she reached up and plucked down some object that had been hanging by a ring in the wall and pointed it for her heart. It was a bowie knife. My heart stopped, hung there in my chest like an eight-day-clock weight, and then administered a mule's kick. I was glassy-eyed, right. She lowered it, laid hold of the blade with those strong hands, pushed the blood-stained handle into my faint grasp, and closed my fingers round it winsomely, the way a man will close a girl's hand playfully round some trinket long desired when he brings it to her. That slight, voiceless maneuver gave me to understand that it was my part now to say nothing and draw blood. With that very blade, *amigo!* It was Terrazas's favorite, people had told me, and he carried the twin sister to this one on his hip, as I knew very well.

My blood ran cold. Granting that our position was one that would have to be defended, all innocent as it was, how was I to conjure up some quick way of conveying that into a brain like the general's, fuddled, probably, with some of those Mexican strong waters and eaten out, besides, with the unlovely disease called jealousy?

Gad! I was between a sweat and a shiver! What the devil was I going to do in the next three or four seconds? There wasn't time to look up precedents. Must I fall on his neck and sink that dagger down just inside his collar bone, with both hands on the handle? Simple, seemingly, and yet it was dollars to doughnuts I would miss it. I would make some ludicrous, sickening miscalculation, the way a bashful man will who goes to work to surprise a girl by planting a kiss on her lips, and gets about as close to it as he does, blindfolded, to pinning the tail on the donkey. No opposition. Ten to one she doesn't mistrust him. She's all receptivity, it may be. No reason in God's world why he shouldn't succeed, and still he doesn't succeed, because he's working against conscience.

I drew off a pace or two toward the window. It was open. Why didn't I jump? I ought to have, and I would have if I'd been anything but the romantic fool I was. But I couldn't square that course with my obligation to Inky in this matter of her incarceration.

I came back and took up my stand near the middle of the room. Poor strategy, of course. If I gave him a chance to get fairly in and size things up, enforced hara-kiri would be my gloomy portion, and I knew it. Say what you will, there is—to a débutante something horribly cramped, something crabbed in that somber style of infighting with crooked short steel. You've probably, when younger, imagined yourself being pinked by a rapier in the hands of a cool adversary—first a slither of steel and a stamp of feet, and

then there's some wretched slip-up, he's past your guard, and there you are, puffing out your cheeks and gritting your teeth and arching your eyebrows, while the clear Damascus passes through your sluggish midriff and grazes your backbone. That's not the high point of satisfaction to the dreamer, I'll agree; but still there's a neatness and dispatch about that long range that's hideously absent in the bowie frolic.

There were other considerations, too, that must be patent to you. One of them was that I simply didn't have the right justification for croaking that unhappy Mexican. Inky, of course, wouldn't see that, and she didn't see it; but the fact was so. She took hold of me by the elbow and tried to urge me back into that favorable position by the door.

"Strike—strike!" she hissed, and still I couldn't form the picture. I didn't have the urge. I lacked, woefully, the psychic buoyancy.

All this, as it's usually stated, was a matter of seconds. I was given a breathing spell by the lucky chance of Terrazas's having paused in the doorway at the farther end of that corridor to listen to some witticism of Bones's and fling back one of his own, and I used that interval in creeping up to Inky, embracing her, laying that knife parallel to her spine, and whispering, "Hide me," with unmistakable sincerity.

And when she saw I was adamant—I felt much more crumbly than that, really, but let it stand—she did hide me, skillfully, too. She stretched herself on the bed, drew the blanket over her artistically, draped it down on the shadow side,

and motioned me to crawl under. I did, too, knife and all, and I had that entangled feeling I had had once before when I had crawled under the bellies of those rams back there in Jim Harker's brother's territory. Entangled, yes; but the circumstances were vastly different, you'll agree. That's the sort of entanglement that will reconcile a man to dying in disgrace, giving up the ghost in exile. Inky lay there prone, her dark head buried in the pillow, a strand of her hair drawn across my face, her elbow crooked under my chin, enjoining silence. Silence, yes; but it seemed to me that it was a speaking silence, with drums and trumpets in it. I thought that silence would crash through Terrazas's eardrums when he came in.

He fumbled about in a corner, for matches, evidently, or tobacco, because directly I heard him strike fire and puff, and I could perfectly see him standing there, that pot-bellied little rascal, with a fat brown cigarette hanging from his thick lips and a tyrannical gleam of his dark eyes as he contemplated the figure of that fair woman lank there under her red blanket, with her hair streaming on the pillow—that woman enslaved and chained for my sake.

I thought, fearsomely, "If he puts his hand on her heart all is lost."

I could feel it beating hotly, vehemently, in my ear; that pulse in her arm—her silent, smooth, detaining arm, hanging limp now, but delicate and powerful; the arm contemplated in its fair perfections by Providence before the dawn of history and fashioned in the fullness of time for my un-

doing. The very arm, *amigo*, that had linked with mine so fatally in the dance at Madcap.

Terrazas was deaf to all this, luckily. He took a deep breath. I heard the fire eating and crackling at the tip of his cigarette, but the smoke had reached my nostrils before he turned and went waddling back to his conference.

"Now," Inky cried, "you must break this chain! You are only just in time, Roberto."

"Just in time?"

"Yes! They are going into Mexico to-night with that treasure down there. The one man they fear is lying at the point of death."

"Maricopa!"

"Yes! Make haste!"

I had a file in my pocket which I used for sharpening axes, and I produced it and started a gash in one of those links.

"How do they depart?" I whispered.

"They will smuggle it over the mountains on a pack train."

"If they move that gold it will be over my dead body!" I said, fiercely.

Yes, for one masterful second I did actually have the interests of the whole United States at heart. I glared at that sleeping lizard on the wall.

Inky's valiant eyes flashed into mine, and she whispered, half scornfully, "How will that help, *amigo*—your dead body?"

Well, on second thoughts, how would it? I could see plainly enough that it wouldn't help at all, and that predisposed me to fall in with her suggestion, which was to the effect that the

treasure would not leave without Terrazas, be sure of that. He was too greedy, too suspicious, to trust it to those children of night who formed his pack train.

"If you hold him you hold everything," she said.

"How do I hold him, then?"

"Break my chain, carry me with you, hide me from him! There are secret trails, I tell you. He will never find us, but he will never depart until he does. He will aspire to be the physician of his own honor, as we say. Ah, and then, when the time is ripe, Roberto, you shall take him in your talons! You are strong!"

Talons! Here was a woman who conceded me talons! A woman, moreover, in chains; a woman in love, palpably, and cruelly beaten for having come to the defense of the man she loved. Weren't these facts invincibly persuasive of themselves? Do you blame me for thinking that there was an immense plausibility in that program as she outlined it?

I might say—I do say, in fact—that the fate of thousands of my fellow-citizens hung in the balance. They were asleep in their beds at the time, and I felt as Hercules must have felt when Atlas sauntered off and left him there holding up the world on his shoulders. I don't blame them, of course, for their indifference. How could they know that Terrazas, Terrazas the terrible, was all but into Mexico again, with gold enough—filched out of the Neck-or-Nothing—to open up that mine of his and begin signing himself Yours for the revolution?

I knew his frame of mind. This coup meant war, and war again meant intervention. No greater public duty lay on any man that night than the duty of keeping that rascally little general out of Mexico, and no better way of doing that single-handed seemed to open up than by running away with his wife.

You say there's no answer to the stern logic of all this, and I agree; and yet my conscience isn't satisfied. It wasn't logic altogether that dictated that perilous alliance. Nothing logical was ever done under the sway of such mortal beauty as Incarnación's. It was partly my amiability, of course—that pliant streak in me that yearned to be of service to a pretty woman; and partly—well, it's hopeless to diagnose it. You are familiar with that saying of a great Frenchman that youth is a continual drunkenness and a fever of the reason. No truer word was ever spoken. Yet for a second I hesitated, and she misinterpreted my hesitation.

"You are still thinking of that girl—your rib," she hissed.

I said, stupidly, "Who?"

"The damsel of the living eyes," she sneered. "You are thinking Jim Harper will never claim her, but you are wrong. He has claimed her already."

"In God's name, where is that man hanging out?" I whispered, hoarsely, and for an answer she held out her chain again, and I attacked it with that little file. A minute more and Incarnación stood up a free woman.

She wasted no time. She was into her shoes and other fixings in a twinkling, had taken up the

knife—I wished she would forget that—and motioned me to the window. I glided through it and received her almost immediately in my arms. For just a second languor overcame her. She drooped there, and in fancy I picked her up and transported her to one of those yellow beaches you'll see on the canvases of Sorolla y Bastida, one of those great curving Spanish strands drowned in surf and sunshine. I fancied we were idling into the water together. A sparkling wind stirred her hair, blue-green swirls of water at her throat, and there we were, serene, beyond the plague of dust and the disdain of philosophers.

So it was, *amigo*, that I juggled with the visible and tangible features of our daily scene in those raw days. Realities were only the springboard from which I launched myself in long dives through the mellow ether of fancy.

And yet the wildest dream can be traced to its rise in some little gleam of the workaday world, I'm quite willing to believe that, and it must have been Inky's lips that accounted for that excessive parabola my thoughts took. Have I alluded to her lips? She had offered them to me again. Great crawling snails! I did age and ripen in those intervals! She was one of the make-and-break, high-frequency types you sometimes see, and I hadn't much ado to glimpse the state of her affections through the medium of those caressing phrases. I whispered what baby Spanish I knew, and, gad! she liked it, she loved it!

We had got away clean from the neighborhood of that hotel, of course; dropped into the canyon

and crept along in the shadow of those giant cottonwoods. My first lucid interval came when the question arose as to where or which way we were making footprints. I was mad enough to suggest the Sprowl camp at one time, but Inky vetoed that.

"We will go there, oh, friend of mine," she whispered, and she made a gesture with one perfect arm toward that mighty pine forest that seethed around the base of the Organ. What was that devil's tune that seemed all at once to grow on the ear, to mock, to menace? The very sands shifted under my feet. I got ugly glints and glimpses of the unwonted character of the step I was taking, and more than likely I was checked and disheartened by that ambiguous gesture of Inky's. There was something possessory and imperious there, and it flattened me out into a dead halt.

Do you recall that Latin motto translated for May by Syd? The motto that she had copied down from over Swasey's desk— "The fates lead the willing and drag the unwilling"? Well, it came back to me with triple force, and for one fateful second I felt as if I was being dragged—distinctly.

Isn't it odd? Here was something being given into my hand as a plain actuality; something that I had dreamed out in detail as the most delicious thing that could happen to me or happen to any man, and now I couldn't see it through the fog. What is there about waking hours, will you tell me, that makes them suffer so in comparison with dreams?

I stood stock-still to put myself that question, and Inky whispered, "What do you hear?"

What did I hear beyond that inward voice? Nothing, nothing but the tinkle of those few links of chain that still hung at her wrist, and yet I swear I had a sudden impulse to take to my heels, and I believe I would have done so, except that a craven notion intervened that she would be hot after me and might bring me down with some variation of that hammer lock that had already laid me low once that evening.

And then I began to be boiling mad, and I felt that this having your lady friends pick you in place of you picking your lady friends wasn't all it was cracked up to be. Where had I been at fault? Had I not braved the keeper of the mine that night in the interests of Clint, my partner and employer? I was ashamed to question Inky about that same, for fear it should turn out not to have been real, after all, but more and more I felt that it was no hallucination. Had I not slid three hundred feet into the bowels of the earth and discovered treasure enough to set us all up for life, enough to set May up, too, if she insisted, in the neatest little specialty shop this side of the Mississippi? And then—here's the irony—with that all just in my grasp, and more, and to stumble, after all, into the very nest of that viper Terrazas and only extricate myself on these hard terms.

And they *were* hard. All romance aside, here I was being walked off with by a married woman, the rib of Terrazas—a floating rib, it now appeared—one who had been ten times married to that man already without cleaving to him any more than mud will to a sunny wall. What were we to do for

a living, assuming that the general was jailed, Inky divorced and remarried to your humble servant? Set up housekeeping, I to collect dirty linen in place of the general? I couldn't see it, and still I felt awfully committed to it. It was the most humiliating moment of my life.

I told myself that I had to reckon on the fact that she was physically my superior and that any plan I set on foot to ship her outright would have to be carefully matured.

Human beings are queer, aren't they? One moment I felt the full force of this reasoning. I knew that I ought to disengage myself, and I wanted to disengage myself; and then in a flash I didn't want to. Account for it how you will. I was still on the other side of the wall, I suppose. I didn't love Inky of set purpose, and I mistrusted from the start that she was too much woman for a bashful youth, and yet I did feel as if there was a kind of wild justice in this escapade.

It took the taste of that Australian out of my mouth, for one thing. I felt that I was in process of being farmed out, to grow in experience to a point where I could afford to smile indulgently at May's attempts at patronage; and if I didn't actually take to my heels it must have been, furthermore, because Inky did exercise some kind of spell over me in spite of everything. I must have loved her involuntarily, as Plato says, just as you love life, even on your worst days, because you realize that it's better to prolong a mystery than to reach a black solution of it.

Incarnación contributed something—she cer-

tainly did. I should be a moral leper to deny it, and I don't deny it. I went stealing along that glittering wash, and step by step my views changed again, and I was less and less chagrined progressively. For even granting Inky's game, even supposing her capable of playing one, what more delightful than to take a hand myself? Politic, too, from every point of view. I couldn't forget that the star given me by Maricopa was glittering on my undershirt even then. I couldn't forget that life was stern business. I had my arm round her. I didn't mean for her to escape me, and, for that matter, she was the most compliant woman in the world and we were nail and flesh, as Juan would say. I told myself that I had simply dropped the thread of one life and picked up another there in that enchanted laneway of cottonwoods, and I account for it by saying that I wasn't the same man, and a character analysis taken at the time would have proved it, I verily believe. My ideals and resolves were totally different from what they had been in that other world, and what makes character if not ideals and resolves?

I got another setback when Inky tightened her hold on my arm and whispered: "Faster! We shall be overtaken by that old carrion. You have no hunger for a shirt incarnadined, I think, my friend."

A shirt incarnadined! She knew well enough my lack of appetite for that same, I apprehend. And yet it was the very thing I had been sent here to procure. I wondered suddenly what Clint would think of this jettison of my whole cargo of morals,

which had at no time threatened to sink the ship. What would Syd think? What would—May?

May! That dear phantom rose up in my path, and I did have the grace to blush for the oblivion she had fallen into. I could hear the very words as she bit them off one by one, the scornful intonation in the separate syllables when she told me that she was pretty substantial and that it would take the right man to carry her off. Was I being carried off by the right woman? What would be May's thoughts, waiting, waiting there at the headgear of that gloomy shaft for the accomplice who never returned? Her eyes seemed to meet mine there in the ether, and there was a burning flash of contempt in them. A sort of duel of our two projected personalities was going on there at white heat when Inky closed her fingers on my arm.

"Voices!" she said.

Voices! Right away I got a picture of that assassin, Terrazas, creeping along at our heels with that crooked knife in his fist and murder in his heart, death looking out at his finger ends, to use his picturesque idiom. I thought all the blood had drained out of my body. There I stood, holding Inky by that fragment of chain, confronted by a wall of unscalable rock. I palpitated with that guilty sense of having crime hung around my neck, and I did hear voices—directly in front of us. I looked around for a good piece of earth to sink into. There wasn't time. Effective concealment was simply impossible.

I forced Inky to her knees behind a shred of

spiny cactus. It didn't half suffice, and a fateful voice called, "Who is there?"

It was May, with the Australian at her elbow, and that second's vision of her swept me off my feet. She stood there in all her clean-cut self-sufficiency, like a young Greek of old, one of the wrestling sisterhood, and leveled that big forty-five at me without a quiver.

I knew what her prowess was with it, too. There was lead enough in that barrel to eradicate a moose, and for one second I thought she was going to blot me out of her young life. I felt as blank as the Desert of Sahara, and there wasn't a quarter as much sand in my make-up, either. I was at a total loss for words, and I stood there with my arms over my head and my heart in my mouth, and May gazed her fill. She was wide-eyed, and you can't wonder.

"You!" she gasped.

And then she dropped her arm to her side and that full-throated little laugh smote on my ears. She had caught sight of Inky.

"There seem to have been some very agreeable secrets in Pandora's box," she said, and she turned me the coldest little shoulder in the world.

And somewhere in the dark I heard Yim, that Arizona nightingale, begin to laugh.

CHAPTER XVIII

MAY had told me once that she couldn't make head or tail of my psychology, and I don't know that you can blame her. Everything is viewpoint, of course, and I don't know that I can explain in words of one syllable the process by which I had filtered back through the wall again. The fact remains, though, that I had no sooner laid eyes on May than that dreamlike question that kept haunting me—hold on, is this right?—was promptly and icily answered in the negative. My soul cried out for rescue, and I found my voice and means to ship Incarnación at one and the same time.

Keeping my arms over my head still, I whispered to Incarnación to run, that I was taken prisoner, but that I might find means to meet her later. I felt her glow at my side, and hadn't courage to look at her, didn't look at her again on that occasion, but walked right up to May, and my features artfully broke into a playful smile as I pitched her these two coy words, "I surrender."

"Don't let me interrupt, please," May said, in skewering accents.

"You're not interrupting," I said, brilliantly. "May, this is all a fearful mistake."

"Mistake!" she shot at me. "I never was so

mistaken in a man in all my life. Let me walk on. I'll thank you to."

I trailed her.

"That was a two-way shaft, it turned out," I pleaded.

"It was a two-way man that went into it," May retorted.

That was the last straw. I was numbered with the slain from that minute. May always did get a lot of kick into her responses; and I was willing to allow for that, but I was too mortally hurt to reply. Why couldn't I have told her frankly that my aim in toying with that woman all along had been to draw Terrazas's gun fire? May's essential nobility of character would have stood up under that disclosure. She was patriotic to the core. And yet I didn't do it.

I pitied myself, and I found something bitterly ironic in my situation. My mind zigzagged back along the road of our sweet partnership—May's and mine—in lightning strokes, and I could accuse myself of scarcely a single vital deviation from that resolve to serve May to the death that I had formed on first acquaintance.

Where was the joint in the armor of my constancy, will you tell me? Do you suppose I would have hurled myself regardless at the slippery side of that Western Flyer if it hadn't been for May's presence in the sleeper and that appeal she had made to me to come aboard? The mere thought of that daredeviltry has me quaking now where I sit. I made bold to affirm that my courage was nothing, less than nothing, without the attractive force of

that exquisite loadstone. I wanted to save May Gowdy from herself. All on fire as I was to chain that young woman to my chariot wheel, can you wonder if I grew bitter when the irony of events persisted in reversing the roles I had assigned for us to play?

The whole mad dash, those hopes of easy cush, and those expectations of completed bliss—all had been for May. I remember a time when I had to shove a bunch of homestead pamphlets into my shoes to keep from puncturing my feet, and I see that even then, more than anything in life, I wanted that girl for my bright fireside angel—every atom of me—not that pale, lovely mocker in the smoke ring, but a being solidified and put to the three-dimensional test.

Well, the hideous levity of chance had mocked me. Even my own character had got warped in the gigantic undertaking, fatally twisted, perhaps, in that moment when Inky's arms stole round me and brought to mind those considerations of duty to my country which forced me to reconsider and ultimately embrace the agreeable notion of playing right into her hands.

You say you could have resisted the temptation, but that's easy-chair sang-froid again, my friend. You may be able to demonstrate on a sunny forenoon in Kansas, without a breath of wind, that you are able to keep both your feet planted on the ground; but what guaranty is that that you will do the same if a living tornado snakes across your path? No guaranty, and we who draw the inconsistent breath of life can prove it to you.

What would you have had me do differently? Wasn't it the simple truth that May's misinterpreted snub in that hallway at Madcap, under the torn canvas of Pikes Peak, had first dashed me into Inky's arms, like a man being rolled over and over in surf, senseless and half stunned? The gods do cheat, the ancients to the contrary notwithstanding. There hadn't been a time from first to last when I wouldn't have cried with Keats, "Heaven shield thee for thine utter loveliness," and Heaven did shield her for that same, without my having part or lot in it.

I was as low in mind as Syd had ever been; apathetic, in fact. I didn't care what became of Inky, but I didn't doubt for a second that she had gone back to Terrazas to blow the gaff, whisper to him my knowledge of his stolen treasure heap down there, and the advisability of clearing out.

I didn't care for that, either. There was a curse on that gold; there was blood on it, and might be more blood. Wild horses wouldn't draw me there again, I told myself, and I felt the more resolute on that point because I was looked at slant-eyed now by practically every member of the Sprowl outfit. Clint himself doubted me, Clint the optimist, down on his knees in that lateral tunnel under the Golden Girl, wheedling his drill into the rock, muttering, cursing, and running drops of water off that insistent nose of his. A candle in a twist of wire over his head flared weirdly. It looked like a taper burning on the altar of a false god, and old King Knute, drawing out his blood-red drill and bowing over it, looked like a man praying.

He doubted me, because he hadn't asked me one word about that night's doings, and I was too sensitive to broach the topic unassisted. There was gold in my very pockets, and I was too mysterious to bring it out into the light of day. Perhaps the keeper of the Pandora had something to do with my awkwardness. I certainly didn't want to come to grips with him again.

We blew the shot in the Golden Girl in midafternoon, and I was still wrestling with my problem when I reached the Sprowl flat, just in time to see that Australian gliding through the flap of May's tent. I felt a frenzy through my limbs, and I thought I was going to fall four different ways. Gad! it was like being burned at the stake! I was all on fire to rush in there, sink to my knees, with the ardor of a lover returning to his love after a cynical interruption, and gush the whole secret.

And yet I didn't do it. A singular perversity withheld me. I felt a foolish, miserable satisfaction in the low state of my fortunes. They were low, no mistake. A door in her heart that surely all this time had stood ajar invitingly was now shut and bolted. I was struck with dismay, and with that humiliating confusion of passions which arises with first knowledge of the desolating externality of a flirtatious woman. The refractory spirit of the gold itself had tragically invaded that girl's bosom.

I can avow it to you now that I felt worse than at any time since I had set out from Dowagiac. Those warnings of Syd's came back to me. I recalled his passion-haunted words of denunciation of May's conduct in entering, however unwarily,

into that game of copenhagen, and her saying that it was no use crying over spilled milk. Spilled milk! It made a difference whose milk was spilled, evidently.

I believe I was veritably on the point of rushing the tent, pulling up the pegs, smothering the precious pair of them in folds of that Egyptian cloth, when Rolfe stepped out of it again. He stopped when he saw me, and I felt my jealousy throwing out a fiery new shoot.

"Are you quick on the draw?"

"Don't think you can throw a scare into me," I said. "Don't think it!"

In the mad impotence of my heart I was about to brush past him without a word, but he seized me by the shoulder.

"You haven't fallen in with Terrazas yet, I take it," he said.

"With Terrazas? No," I faltered.

He lifted his hand and hit me twice, softly and deliberately, on the chest.

"He is looking for his wife, *amigo*," he said.

"His wife?"

"That same!"

I grew cold all over. She hadn't gone back to him. Wasn't that fatal retaliation, I ask you? She had lost herself in the mazes of the canyon, leaving the general to the just inference that she had succumbed to my superior charms. But again, was it retaliation? It might be sheer faithfulness to me that had motivated my dark Spaniard. I did have a drag with women, you know, and she did demonstrably enjoy herself in my company.

I wouldn't give Rolfe the satisfaction of seeing those inward tremors, though. I rubbed my hands and said: "Good! The plot thickens. The bird is all but in my hand."

"You'll let him stay in the bush if you know where you're well off," Rolfe retorted, and swung off down the trail.

I stood there turning up pebbles with my foot. I felt something like the whisper of an ugly threat in the pellucid air, in the deadly quiet of that flat, all surrounded by black oaks, and with the horrific countenance of the mountain gloating over me at scarcely more than arm's length. All those foothills lying there so smoky green had a composed and watchful air, and there was even a kind of ponderous tranquillity about the farther-lying desert that made me feel frail—not well bottomed, somehow—and as if my motions were only vain gesticulations. That rotted cactus to the left of the kitchen shack looked like a bald-headed lunatic balanced there, with stumps for arms, beckoning me into an untimely grave.

I certainly did have shoots and darts of queer psychology, and I asked myself whether it was humanly possible for a man to elude the ambush that destiny plants for him? Isn't it plain enough that I had been railroaded into that compact with Maricopa, and that I would have been justified in ignoring it? Yet all the demons of the desert meant that I should keep it. Maricopa himself lay at death's door, it might very well be, his long body in an interesting horizontal pose and his trigger finger uncurled; but yet if the nose of his gun had

all the time been pushed into the small of my back I couldn't have done a better job for him.

I tell you flat, it's moments like those that force a man to question the eternal verities. I felt that every man's hand and every woman's heart was dead against me. The sight of Syd coming out of our joint sleeping quarters only confirmed me in that view. Why had I brought him here? What had I got for that kindness but black ingratitude, contempt, a pale display of morals? I had taken him in and fed him and been the means of his keeping his hooks on that respectability which was the breath of life to him, and now he looked at me as if I was the fiend incarnate. He even started to circle round me, the way you circle round a rattler.

That was too much for me. I ranged alongside him and muttered, tigerishly, "So you are another one that is going to hand me a ticket to oblivion, are you?"

And Syd said, hoarsely: "You have deserved your fate. You have played fast and loose from first to last, and it's no more than I expected of you."

Fast and loose! For a second I was all set to climb him, crown him, and make him eat his own words. I was on the point of telling him to get out of camp before sundown, but a conviction of my powerlessness in that matter withheld me. By the very fact of Syd's insolence I knew that my day was over in those diggings.

I turned my back on the whole flat and took the canyon trail to think things out. I was light-headed, waggle-kneed from lack of food, but I

knew it was no hallucination when old Sprowl plucked me by the elbow.

"Don't abandon me," he said, heavily. "I don't know what you have been up to, and I guess nobody here does, but I'll overlook it. You go to work in the morning the same as usual, my boy."

He looked like an old madman. The light in his eyes had nothing to do with this world.

"I feel like quoting Scripture," he said. He came close to me, shook a ragged, shrunken arm in the direction of one of those glaring holes in the porphyry dike, and whispered, "'Whoso diggeth a pit shall fall therein—fall therein.'" He laughed madly. "Do you hear that? Young man, you have digged the pit—you have digged the pit—you have digged the pit."

My blood went cold, and I did distinctly feel that I had dug the pit. He clutched me by the wrist and cried, tremulously: "Where's the gold, boy? Where's the gold?"

"I don't know!" I yelled, exasperated, and lying to a madman sent a curdle through my blood.

"Yes, you do, too! Yes, you do, too! You know where it is! I've watched you! You can go and put your finger on it this minute! You know."

He clawed at me, sank to his knees, and prayed me to reveal its hiding place. Was it in the Harsh, the Hard One? Was it in the Neck-or-Nothing? Where was it? He was an old man and he had labored much. Now he was not long for this world. See, he had aided me by not eating that precious store of food. For a week he had eaten nothing, literally, and that I knew for fact. He

had sat in his chair, and the mountains had skipped like rams; they had toppled over him and buried him two thousand feet deep. But sitting there in the burning sunshine, he, Dan Sprowl, the wonder of the western ocean, had had a dream, and in that dream he had been told to look to me for that great treasure.

"Not for me," he pleaded. "I wouldn't ask this for myself. For my girl Aury. I had no right to bring her here. I'm an old gambler, and I've wronged her. This is no place for a girl. I said every day that I would go away if God gave me power, and I couldn't go away. My feet stuck fast here. My feet took hold on hell."

I said nothing. I couldn't speak, couldn't collect myself at all, and my own difficulties seemed suddenly small in comparison with Dan's.

"Come!" he panted. "You say nothing! Tell me! Where is it? My treasure—for Aury. I can't go away and leave her unprovided for."

His eyes menaced me, and his voice grew harsh and domineering—his sea voice. Where was the gold? Was it there in those three purplish streaks running down the mountain side? Sat the wind in that quarter? Strange that he had overlooked that patch of color all these years. The mountains must have shifted again, just as they had shifted before, and plucked away from him that vein in the Golden Girl when he had all but got his thumb on it, all but nipped it. The world had turned itself upside down, inside out, to thwart him. The poles had reversed themselves.

Next he attacked me with a bribe. The others

need know nothing. He would get a sack and we two could go away and fill it, share and share alike, shovelful for shovelful, neither more nor less. I should have a fair half of the reward of the toil and agony of all these hateful years.

"I make you a fair offer," he gasped, and then his eyes wandered into the skies where those watchful birds were circling round and round. One of them wheeled lower and lower, dropped into the yellow sand, and the old fellow glared and crept toward it and fell on its neck and throttled it. The dying bird beat the sand up into Black Dan's face with one ugly wing, but the old fellow hung on hard and polished it off.

"I'll show them what they're waiting for!" he rasped at me, and his face was shining wet with sweat. "They are so fond of Dan. I put out strychnine for 'em," he muttered, waggishly, "all around, all around."

By George! I could feel heavy in my pockets those lumps of raw gold filched from the treasure which belonged to that old madman! I had eaten his bread and worked his mine, and then kept this knowledge to myself from pure sulks as much as anything. What if they did all take me for a traitor? Something was due them, even so. The thought came back insistently that the gold must still be lying there under the black wing of its hideous keeper, since Inky had not gone back to Terrazas. The general would know that somebody had filed her chain, but it would not occur to him that his cache had been discovered.

Yes, since he insisted, he should have his gold.

I wheeled him back into his chair and walked into the tent where Syd and Clinton were mooning. Neither of them had one word for me, nothing but portentous looks. I walked past them and threw lump after lump of that fairy quartz on the deal table where Clint's cleavers and saws were lying.

Poor old King Knute! I heard the breath hiss from his body in one long exhalation, as if he had been holding it ever since coming here. He fumbled for his magnifying glass.

"You don't need that," I muttered. "It's gold, gold to the naked eye—three-quarters gold."

"Where from?" he inquired, timidly.

"Where from? Where do you think? From the Pandora, where you could have put your hand on it any hour of the day or night ever since you came here, only you wouldn't do it."

"You've been—down there?"

"No, coaxed it up with a magnet," I whispered, satirically. "It's the way you said about this canyon—the fools are all dead long ago."

Tears filled Clint's eyes.

"I've felt it—I've felt it all along—in my supreme being," he muttered.

I looked at Syd. He was creeping out of the tent when I collared him and flung him back on his cot.

"Sit down!" I said, ferociously. "Don't think you can crawl out of this. Moral or immoral, you're going into it and take your share of punishment. There's work for all of us to-night." I turned to Clint. "This gold is lying bagged in an offshoot from the Pandora, an old working. The

stuff must have been gouged out of some low-lying vein in the Neck-or-Nothing. The job is for three men. I don't trust Juan. Syd here and I will go down into the shaft after the gold and you will guard the headgear. The gold is ours, so let's go after it."

"I won't be a party to it!" Syd gasped.

"What's the matter now?" I sneered. "Prudential considerations? Are you afraid you may be going to get a red shirt out of it? Well, you're darn right—you may get something worse. There's some kind of gouffre down there, but you are coming, my beauty, if you come at the point of a gun."

"I was induced to come here under false pretenses," Syd said, defiantly. "It may look queer for me to tell you this, but I am in a position—I happen to know something about this gold he tells about, and you have no right, no right to it at all."

"Why, Mister Man?"

"Because," said Syd, "it wasn't taken out of the Neck-or-Nothing. It was stolen from the Black Prince."

I felt as the defeated pug must feel when the mat comes up to meet him. Stolen from the Black Prince! And Syd would never tell a lie, I knew that perfectly. I saw him clutch Clint desperately.

"Don't let him do it!" he whined. "I know his character! It's false, the way I've told you. False to the core! There that girl came out here to marry another man, Jim Harper, and Jim wasn't

nere, and he worked on her! He worked on her! What do you hear about Jim Harper nowadays? Not a whisper! It would lead you to think that Jim was dead and gone, wouldn't it? But he isn't! Clint, that bandaged man, Polhill, is Jim Harper!"

"That man?" Clint said, with a toplofty smile. "You're crazy! Why, that man Polhill is known from one end of the canyon to the other!"

"Known—yes, known for what? Known by what?" Syd continued, in a ghastly whisper. "Known for a stuffed figure—not so much as the tip of his nose showing. It's a disguise—Jim's disguise."

Gad! I knew it that minute! Every word of that sorry tale rang true. They were bull's-eyes, and had crippling force. Jim, Jim, the ghost, Jim the dim memory, Jim that wraith of a forgotten love, had come into that tent and straddled my cot for a last time. Unearthed, unwrapped after æons of time, like an Egyptian mummy from its swaddling, he began to crumble already at a breath of air. Disguise!

"What does he want of a disguise?" Clint whispered, fearsomely.

"Because he's wanted," Syd answered through his fingers. "He's a thief. He looted the Black Prince."

"Looted it? Impossible!" the lucky Swede thrust in. "You don't know how they are fixed up down there to guard against that."

He asked Syd earnestly if he didn't know the elaborate system there whereby the men undressed in one locker and walked stark naked through a

narrow corridor to get to their working clothes. Examination of their bodies was strict. They did everything but look under their tongues, as if it was a diamond mine, and the reverse process on coming out. Not a chance of eluding the rigors of that system.

"Have you forgotten the True Friend?" Syd cried. Ah, to be sure, that mine that had been closed by order of the federal court, or at least forbidden to pursue its only vein of any consequence through the side line of the Black Prince. "It belonged to Swasey, and Jim was nothing but a plant of Swasey's," Mr. Hecker faltered out of the abundance of his knowledge.

Swasey was an old rock man. He had seen the indications in the Black Prince and in his own mine. He knew the dip and the strike of that secret vein, and he knew when and where to look for that bonanza, that gold pocket.

"He put Jim into the Black Prince as a sampler," Sydney just breathed, with a look of holy horror. "Jim has told me all about it. He was desperate to get a good stake, knowing that May was coming out—he had got her wire just at a time when he was down to hardpan right and didn't want his bluff called—he was ripe for anything."

As sampler it was Jim's duty to bring samples of ore to the surface twice a shift and lay them on the sample table. Jim had pulled the wool over the superintendent's eyes by bringing up samples of barren rock. For that matter, nobody had paid much attention to that dark tunnel which was being driven on the confines of the mine. It was

being driven simply with the idea of hooking up two ventilation systems, driven by Mexicans; and, as it turned out later, they were soldiers of Terrazas who were drifting there in six-hour shifts when they broke into that secret chamber of jagged gold.

"Jim told me that himself," Syd whispered. "Terrazas was lord high and mighty of that Mexican village, and Jim had the key to that iron door on the eighth level that separates the mines. The gold was backed out that way, loaded on burros, the sacks covered with mesquite, and away they went. Nobody knew where.

"They brought the stuff here, as a matter of fact," Syd went on. "God knows what they did with Polhill. Jim doesn't know, himself. But they put Jim into his clothes and waited for the thing to blow over."

"You don't know what they did with Polhill?" Clint asked, hoarsely.

No, Syd didn't. But I did. I saw Polhill now plainly in the role of keeper of the mine, that shadow, that hallucination, voiceless and eyeless, chained there deep under the Empire, the uncanny guardian of the loot from the Black Prince.

"How did you come to find out about Jim?" was Clint's next question.

Syd didn't spare himself. He said that when Faggard—Bones—had ceased to come to visit her, Azalea had requisitioned his services to take notes back and forth between these worthies. He didn't know what the subject was. The notes were in Spanish. It was one night while he was sitting there in the Empire waiting for Bones to pen an

answer that his eye had fallen on the hand of that enigma, that effigy, Sebastian Polhill, and—well, he saw at once that it was Jim's hand. It was Jim's left hand that lay there fiddling with the arm of the chair, his left hook, and the knuckle of the third finger was sunk in out of sight, bashed in completely. Syd didn't say so, but I shouldn't wonder if his own jaw had done that damage.

At any rate, Syd was certain of his man, and found a chance to call him by his name, Jim. Open sesame. With that one word Syd drew speech from that effigy that had withstood the temptation to talk through all those weary weeks of being muffled up behind bandages. Jim besought his old friend to take measures to get May Gowdy out of the canyon before insane jealousy —that disease—should drive Jim into the open, force him to strip those bandages from his handsome face, fall at her feet, beg forgiveness, and—find himself lookingout at her from behind the bars of a cell.

"You see now what his motive was in bringing May way down here?" Syd whispered, miserably, nodding at me, and he gave me that old look that said plainer than words that I wasn't to be trusted, that I would beat up money while your back was turned. "I knew he had a motive, of course, but I didn't know what it was until poor Jim told me. Somebody had tipped him off that Jim had looted the Black Prince and got clear away into the canyon. But, don't you see, he didn't know whereabouts. It's a big place. So he thought if he paraded that girl here in the canyon long enough

Jim would do something foolish that would show him up. Why, Mr. Clint, he brought that girl down here as bait, live bait, to catch his fish! And once Jim was behind the bars, what was to stand between him and May any longer? If, in the meantime, her eye hadn't been caught by another man, that is. Let him deny it if he can. He can't deny it!"

And that cursed Machiavellian streak in me prompted me to say, guardedly, "Well, what if you were right?"

"He admits it!" Syd breathed. "What is my duty in the circumstances?"

"Jim trusts you," I said. "Wouldn't it be the neat thing to betray him and hand him over to the authorities? You say he's a criminal."

"I haven't slept for four nights thinking of that," Syd said. "Wouldn't I be an accessory to hold back this knowledge?"

"How long have you known about it?"

"Two weeks."

"Well, then, you are an accessory, and it's my plain duty to put you under arrest," I said, and I tapped my chest, opened the shirt, and revealed that star shining on the bulge of my pectorals. "This concealment of yours has been compounding a felony, and the chance is now that he has got off scot-free. You're an accessory after the fact."

Syd sank down with his head in his hands, sobbing outright. You see the prospect that was opening up for me? I didn't mean to arrest him, of course; but I did vaguely mean to hold that club over him and force him to keep his mouth

shut while I formulated a plan to save Jim from Maricopa's minions. Isn't it plain that if I wanted to be friends with May I would have to prove by some decisive act that Syd's analysis of my motives in bringing her here was wrong, dead wrong? What did I care for Maricopa now? I had a picture of him at the point of death, and even so I was minded to tip him off backward into eternity for not telling me the use he intended to put me and May Gowdy to in this Canyon of Fools. I felt that while red shirts were passing round, Maricopa had earned his, and my trigger finger itched to give it to him.

I glared at Syd. There I was, owing what life there was in me, all but, to the very woman I had come to save from worse than death, and now I looked to be going to sacrifice even the remnant of her good will through the blundering ineptitude of this waggle-faced moralist.

"Yes, an accessory," I hissed. "And let me tell you this, mister—one syllable from you, outside this tent, about Jim's presence in the canyon, and it will be your last official act on this planet. Do I make myself plain?"

"You mean," Syd whispered, "that you would shoot me down in cold blood?"

"I mean that for two cents I would provide you with a red shirt right where you sit," I foamed. "I'm not in any joking mood."

And, by Judas! if I had been, the happenings of the next few seconds would have banished it. The tent flap behind me whipped open and May came in. I never saw anything before or since to equal

the white anger in that young woman's face. She was taut as a cord, strung up to the pitch of passionate invective, and shot defiance at me out of those eyes, those living eyes. That blue glance of hers fixed me, transpierced me like a lance, and left me there quivering and fishing round for words in an empty chaos.

"So," she whispered, "you're what they all say, what I couldn't believe—an adventurer!"

Strange—that word, coming from May's lips, was laden with poison, its barb dipped in venom of the first order, and yet—I felt my world falling in ruin all round me, too—and yet I half liked it. Adventurer! A man must have done something awfully good or awfully bad to have earned an appellation like that. No sincy-soncy character would have it applied to him, even in a moment of wrath. Glory be! she had met the shock of my personality with the full shock of hers at last! For the first time and the last time I plainly saw.

Adventurer! That word winked at me out of blackness, and I got a new bearing on it every two or three seconds. In one flash I was pleased, and in the next I knew that I would give anything to get an inoculation with the virus of Syd's ingrained respectability. I hadn't ever meant to push adventure to the point where I would find myself out of doors with May, and now I *was* out of doors with her.

I cried, feebly, "You don't understand, dear girl."

I was half inclined to roar her down. It was on my tongue's end to snap out that eavesdroppers

hear no good of themselves, in our old style, but I lacked force to shape the syllables.

"I don't want to," May cried, holding fast to the tent pole. "But I do—I do understand perfectly. I see it all now. Oh, it was vile!"

You remember that popular old chromo where the miller's pretty daughter is brandishing a brass candlestick in the face of the libertine with the burnsides and natty Prince Albert, and shouting at him, "I'm not afraid of you now!"

Well, I felt like that libertine, shipwrecked in my shoes, and I went limp as a spilled sail.

"But, May, look here!" I pleaded. "Use a little reason—just a ladleful. If I knew all this about Jim, why did I hold back on it? Why not spill the truth at Madcap?"

"You wanted to make it more dramatic," May countered, and she choked over a little sob. "I know your kind, I hope, by this time."

She was beautiful and terrible, standing there in that little rough-dried shirt waist. I groveled, I bowed the head, I bent the knee, I bit the dust.

"As God lives, May," I whimpered, "I didn't have an inkling. I've been double-crossed by Maricopa. He must have seen from how I felt toward you that I wouldn't stand for anything crude being pulled, and so he pushed across that myth about Jim's—about Jim's—"

"Didn't I just overhear you tell this man?" May blazed out with a fierce shake of her bobbed head at virtuous Syd. "Didn't I hear you as good as tell him that you knew? He accused you, and you didn't deny. You couldn't deny!"

"Deny?" I groaned. "I've never told that man anything but fairy stories. They comfort him. Nursery stuff. Why, May, you don't expect me to talk like a citizen to that man, I hope!"

"Like a citizen!" she flashed at me. "Why, how can you? You can't for the good and sufficient reason that *you're not a citizen yet.*"

I was knocked cold by that. How did she know? If I had had seconds I would have lisped out to them to throw the sponge through the ropes and carry me back into my corner. Well, I had no seconds, and while I stood there with my guard down, both arms dangling and my sight dim, May shoved across the haymaker that stopped my heart.

"You needn't bully that poor boy any longer," she said. "He's not the accessory."

"Who is then, pray?"

"I—I am."

"You—you are?"

"Yes. Take me, why don't you? Put the irons on me," May said, in level tones, and she actually held out her crossed wrists to me.

"I don't get you," I said, backing away.

"Don't you? It's plain enough. I've helped Jim to escape."

"Helped him?" I gasped, stupidly.

"I suppose you thought I had been idle all this time," May said, contemptuously. "You must go around with your head in a bag. At any rate, you don't allow much for a woman's intuitions, Mr. McCarty. Thank God, Jim is out of this mess now, over the border in a fast machine! I went to him

in the night and arranged it. Well, I'm ready to pay the penalty, Mister Sheriff. I guess it's the only way a man like you can take me prisoner."

She spat those words out scornfully, satirically; and that star on my chest, that secret star, burned white hot, seemed to sink through my ribs. I couldn't speak, I couldn't lift a hand, and I saw those two delicate crossed hands through a haze, as if I had taken a long dive, as if I saw them glimmering under water without being able to grasp them.

I merely stuttered: "I guess this is the finish. You've nothing any longer to fear from me," and I turned and stumbled away from that tent like a blind man.

CHAPTER XIX

ADVENTURER! Yes, I had been that decidedly, adventured my life, my fortunes—put them all on one turn of the wheel without a quiver, but not with any sinister motive. No, I had seemed to know from that very moment, that distant moment in the Gowdy parlor when I lifted down his picture from the plush runner on the organ, that Jim Harper had come of degenerated stock. He didn't have back head enough, for one thing, and that would have put me on my guard by itself; but for a second thing, his eyes were too wide apart, and his ears didn't hug his scalp close enough to suit me. I don't remember whether he had a dimple in his chin or not.

Of course May couldn't have been expected to be a student in physiognomy, and still I was surprised that she should have shown so little discrimination, with a whole townful of eligible males to choose from. Women are cautious enough in making their selections when they shop, Heaven knows. They don't close with an article until they are fairly sure they can make friends with it. But they seem to let go all their canny instincts when it comes to picking out a male.

It was plain enough to me now why May hadn't wanted me to meddle with Jim's problem—not so

easy to read meaning into those lush crises with Rolfe. She had seen Jim, helped him get away—right under my nose, too—the nose of an adventurer.

Well, adventurers are of all sorts, of course. There is adventure which ennobles, I suppose, as well as that which degrades; adventure which dreams, aspires, rescues, liberates. Adventure isn't adventure unless some captured spirit is let free, or *vice versa*. That's the same thing as saying it won't fizz, it won't ferment, unless the woman principle is shaken up in it.

There are traveling bodies, and there are traveling souls, too. All those glorious embattled weeks in the sunny side of Paradise I had felt like a traveling soul, but that was past now—past and gone. Gad! You very likely smile, and yet you won't take it amiss, I hope, if I say that my soul had turned to ashes and these ashes had been seized upon and divided among the four winds of heaven—the roaring winds. The vernal equinox of the spirit was upon me—yes, bear with me; there is such a thing—a siege of generous youth by the tempestuous ring of powers that make up the impulse to despair. I felt as if the soul within me had faulted, as the burly earth itself faults, by a dying down of internal fires.

I was ashes, if you choose; and yet you recall that saying of Lord Bacon's that even ashes are more pregnant than the dust. I wasn't quite extinct.

It struck me as a good joke that whereas I had merely pretended the part of a lonely outcast, here

I was playing it, cast for it precisely by the irony of chance. I stopped in front of the entrance to the refrigerator and drew back as if it had been the entrance to Tartarus. Incarnación! Where was she now? A fugitive, even as I was? A yearning came over me. She alone had been faithful to me. She had never gone back. I stared into that hole in the rock hopefully, and I did hear the scrape of a footstep coming along that passage. I leaned forward, but it was only Uncle Peter who came out. He smiled at me and exhibited those two mortal great tushes of his, one at each end of his smile.

"No good looking for her here," he whispered against the back of his hand, just as he had before when Inky's whereabouts had come in question.

"Farther up?" I gulped.

"Just follow your nose," he chuckled.

I certainly never was cut out for the clandestine, but I did feel that if amends could be made to that magnificent wild woman I ought to make them.

Yes, and I had my old sensation come flooding back to me, that hidden murmur, that throbbing premonition of her being actually in the wind somehow. Those stormy and aërial traits in her character suggested it, perhaps. I looked into the fierce sun for traces of her, and I told myself with quickened pulses that if I could meet her now I would lose myself with her in the darkness of that great pine forest that seethed around the pipes of the Organ; lose myself for all time, nothing now to hold me back, not even my natural perversity.

I turned my steps in the direction indicated by Uncle Peter's jerk of the thumb. Yellow sand,

gray walls, blue sky, nothing more. I plodded on. Before long my dull eyes rested on Yim, the burro, standing there in the shade of a mesquite in company with a black jennet and certain confrères of still more dubious origin and import. Yim was docile, but docility is a blank virtue, after all, and, like all tame things, Tim was led by the wild. He stood there and swung his head toward me with that habitual calm conviction stamped on his every feature that the concerns of this world were only sorry fumings, a racking of the brain, and a straining of conscience. His tail hung like a dead thing, and he was dragging from his neck a fragment of the halter which he had chewed off. He had probably adjusted himself now to that object so as to view it as a tiresome but integral part of his personality.

I made a move in his direction and he skipped away from me. He preserved his haunting likeness to a dusty animal out of a Noah's ark, too. His eyes had deep hollows over them that gave them a permanently sorrowful cast, and yet he looked like a humorist, too—a humorist who could sound depths.

I sat down and lit my pipe and threw out a cloud of smoke in his direction, and I believe Yim actually conveyed through an open port in my breast some part of his mystery of living. Why torture myself? Why try to fathom women? I tried to pitch my thoughts in the key of that brave insouciance, and for an eyewink I succeeded.

Then another spasm of unavailing regret seized me. I could never go back to May. I took that

for certain, and I felt like a man who has lost all bearings on a thick night. I remember now, for illustration, that when I was a boy—it was a year or two before this flight into the West—I had a spell of wheeling on the Lakes. It's given a nautical flavor to the rest of my life, really. There I was one cold autumn night in the wheel house of an old junk of a freighter, twiddling the spokes and sweating blood in an effort to keep her drunken nose into the sea, when the skipper put his head in and gave me a star to steer by. The light in the binnacle had winked out, understand.

"Steer for that star just off the port rigging—right there in the eyes of the rigging, son," he said to me, and then a cloud or a shred of mist absorbed that scintillating point of light, and a dismayed feeling came over me. I felt like a little boy that has let go his mother's hand in a crowd. The ship was plowing ahead into blackness, irrevocably, just as life goes on whether you've got a grip of it or not. I felt the dogged beat of that old one-lunged engine shaking the ship's diaphragm—it didn't know I had lost my star—and I heard from somewhere in the bowels of the ship the rasp of shovels, weird yells and catcalls, and the clash and clang of iron doors. I had the horrible sense that any minute she would fetch up hard, grind her bottom against the lake's bottom, split, blow up, send the whole boiling of us sky high, and I bawled out to that funny old fellow on the bridge that I had lost my star, I had lost my star!

"You've lost your wits, too," he said to me, and it's a fact those two losses go together.

I had lost my star again, my dainty star, that had been shooting through the ether with my wagon hitched around its neck, as I supposed; and I had as good as lost my wits, too.

I shook myself together, jumped up. Yim made a correlative movement as if we were part and parcel of the same nervous organism. It came over me with a rush that the sun wasn't as high as it had been. A line of blue shadow was moving over that rack of great bowlders at my feet and extinguishing the green fires in patches of moss lying between them.

A fatal weariness of brain and body held me chained there, and when I did finally move on it was to plunge deeper yet into the canyon. I didn't know what I wanted, where I was, or why I picked up my feet so consistently and set them down one ahead of the other. I had lost my star, and now, whichever way I steered, nothing but shipwreck could result. I must have wandered a good distance in that haze, because when I came to enough to have another look at my surroundings I found craggy walls towering on every hand. It was mortal quiet there, too, nothing but the plashing of a rill of water into a clear pool at my feet and the scratching and flapping of some bulky bird somewhere aloft in one of those stone chimneys.

Was it a bird, though? My attention was drawn sharply toward those upper reaches by the definite fall of a fragment of rock. That was too much to expect of a bird, and I tilted back my head. A human figure was gliding along the coping of stone high up there.

Incarnación! Her hair hung in tangled masses over her shoulders, one of her arms showed a long bleeding scratch, and her eyes burned on me like the eyes of a hunted thing. Gad! and do you know, directly I was eggful of romance again. I swarmed and seethed with those possibilities that any new departure will suggest. I cared nothing then for the danger of recapturing a woman who was capable of pushing a knife into my clammy fist and telling me to sink it deep. I only knew that that splendid animal lurked there—Incarnación—and I whispered those magic syllables, at the same time lifting my arms.

"*Adonde?*" I cried. Whither? The same question she had flung in my path when it crossed hers for the first time, that intriguing, posing question. There's no answer to it, really. I yearned to take her in my arms, quiet her struggles, subdue all contrary impulses, hold her close—the last thing on earth that might willingly lie there in view of all the facts, and I opened my mouth again in what was intended for a whisper of encouragement.

It didn't reach her. She was beyond my reach; yes, as far beyond as an ideal after it has gone glimmering. Her black brows were drawn together, she brooded for one instant, held herself taut as if for supreme effort. I wouldn't have been surprised if she had launched herself bodily on me, perhaps; but I was surprised—knocked off my pins, in fact—by that spit of flame, followed by a deafening report, that seemed to come out of the rock under her unforgiving breast.

Yes, literally knocked off my pins. I felt a sharp knock against my heart—I had been standing, gawking, on a small bowlder—and I went down in a heap. I don't think I had weakened perceptibly—I don't recall doing that—but it seemed the conventional thing to do for a man who had been shot, perhaps fatally, to crumple, and I did it.

Shot down in my trcks! Can you imagine it? And by that kiss-or-kill woman that Clint had warned me I don't know how many times to steer clear of—and with reason enough, in the light of what had happened. My leg got twisted under me in falling, and I suffered agonies with the pain of that.

I put my hand to my chest, and when I took it away there was blood on it, a broad, brilliant smear, hideous in that red sunlight. I stared at it, stupefied, and I felt more than a little sickened. I was bleeding like a stuck pig. I had got my red shirt at last!

From an unexpected quarter, too, you'll agree. A dozen numb notions of what to do were jostling together somewhere in the back of my brain, but I wound up by doing nothing. I suppose I ought to have folded my arms on my chest or bared my heart, my faithful heart, to the attack. I didn't even do that. Instead, my arms hung limp, I stared and stared, and I had that limp, gone, incredulous feeling that it simply wasn't possible I was going to depart this life, no matter how much circumstances seemed to favor that departure. How could the world exist without my being there

to interpret it with my fine sense of irony? What was going to become of those glooming mountains, shortly, heaped up there for my especial benefit? And what could be the fate of all those haunted human hearts beating round me if the thread of my existence were prematurely snapped?

You laugh at these maunderings, but I couldn't imagine a state of things based on my elimination, and I can't now. I caught glimpse after glimpse of the brilliant painted features of that scene. I thought, astounded: "Why don't I die? I'm shot through the heart, of course;" but everything continued to look pretty sharp and clear, and within a second or two I heard a noisy report back of me.

"That will be Terrazas," I ruminated. "Gunning for me on all sides."

I thought there wasn't room for more emotion in me. I was too utterly flabbergasted to be afraid any more; but in sinking back I let my head roll on my shoulders, and that brought the person blazing away at my back into the range of vision.

It was May Gowdy.

Seconds went by—and I lived æons, blistering æons, in those selfsame seconds—before I could rid myself of the notion that I was fairly caught between two fires, and that both those women were trying to drill me in the bean, as Joe Carney would have said. And their juxtaposition there made my fate appear just, I must confess. I caught my breath, and I felt the fearful swoop of a thought that had never come to me before. Wasn't I perhaps a criminal of deepest dye, a low

scoundrel? How could I tell? Had I hitherto got a right slant on myself? Does a criminal recognize himself for what he is, except in just such whiffs and snatches?

And it wasn't till I saw May raise her gun a second time, with that trained carefulness—she rested her right elbow in the palm of her left hand, with her body hugged tight in the curve of her left forearm just as she used to do in target practice—it wasn't till I saw the nose of her shooting iron point high up among those rocks that I came to myself enough to see that May was on my side.

Can you imagine it? She had trailed me. She meant to be in at the death, she told me later. What a moment! What a woman, too! What women, when you come to that! I don't know how many shots they exchanged, but it was a weird duel for an unattached man to have to listen to. In my bitterness I closed my eyes. I wouldn't even look at those soft-handed gun fighters, and I thought myself in that feathery stage that just precedes exit.

My prone body being fought over by two jealous women, and I not able to lift a hand to stop the slaughter and too weak to whisper. Such was the harsh fate of El Romantico—The Romantic. I heard those guns bark at least twice apiece, and once the prowling scream and fading twang of a ricocheting bullet, like a wandering bumblebee browsing past my ear.

Then silence. Then, with a rush, May was all about me, lifting my head, melting my heart, sink-

ing there like an angel, crying out in little frantic syllables, yearning over me, pouring out her heart in those swift little pulses that buoyed me up with a queer sense that if wishing had anything to do with it everything might not be at an end, after all.

"Thank God, it isn't through your heart!" were May's first coherent words.

"Not—not through the heart?" I muttered.

"No, just a nasty gash along the rib."

I felt the touch of her fingers cold on my flesh.

"Did you—bag her?" I faltered.

"Bag her? Mercy, no!" May said. "I only shoot to frighten, as a rule."

"You stood there and let her shoot at you," I murmured, but May pretended not to hear me. She had let me sink back, and pillowed my head on a warm hollow in the stone for one second, wherein I heard the sound of tearing cloth. She was making bandages out of the only material available.

It was wonderful to feel that tender influence falling all round me again. I didn't try to reason out what I had done to deserve it. From where I lay I caught a glimpse of a big accumulation of cloud shapes over the Organ, and I fancied it was going to rain hard before long; but that didn't worry me as it should have. I was satisfied to rest there dreamily, with my head held fast against her side. She stuck to the job like a little major, sponged the blood away and wrapped my throbbing body tight in those romantic bandages. I just let her have her way. It would have been a great chance to have murmured, "I am dying, Egypt, dying,"

but I actually thought I might be—I wasn't sure of May's diagnosis—and I let that chance slip.

"How comes it you are here?" I said, instead, and that was a surprising thing to me.

"Bawl me out for it, do!" May cried. "I couldn't help it, Bobolink."

"You—followed me?"

She nodded, with a bright scintillation in the eye.

"I thought when one of us stopped following it was time for the other to begin."

"But still, after what had— Why, May, it was right after you had ladled that hot lead into me!"

"Don't!" May cried, and put her hand over my mouth. "Dear boy, I know I did. It was fierce, wasn't it? I could have bitten my tongue out. It caught me unawares, that's all. It just knocked me all of a heap, coming after my finding you with that woman."

"I don't see how that could worry you," I drawled. "It's not as if I meant anything to you, or as if you were of a jealous disposition."

"No, not that," cried my little partner, "only, I did just have the strangest sensation—just for the moment—where we had been partners and all. You wouldn't hold that up against me. Bobolink, we're—partners still, aren't we?"

"You don't know—you can't know the man I am," I groaned. "You come on me here, shot down by a woman who has all the justification on her side, and you can still have a show of sympathy with me?"

Yes, she could, and more than that.

"I don't care if you know it. I don't care if anybody knows I knew, what was coming to you, you mad boy, and I didn't mean for you to walk into it alone while there was breath in my body."

She knew what was coming to me! That gave me a twinge, one of my old twinges that caught me when I saw myself left trailing by her superior insight. I lay there sparring for wind, and I saw that she had done this out of pity, out of pity for my weakness, and I wouldn't spring anything lush to save my soul from hell. I felt that there was a barrier raised up between us higher than the Great Wall of China. I was muted again. I could just bring out the words, "That was dear of you."

And May said with her old frankness, "I couldn't help it," and her blue eyes stood near mine, blue as the day itself, crystal blue.

How had I ever thought them cold? They were dewy and tenderly solicitous. All that snappy competence had been drowned in those pellucid depths. That silky blue-black hair nested over her ears caught the sun in hot pulses of light. Her hands went up instinctively to rearrange it when she saw my eye on it, and it was then that I noted that scarlet drop trembling at the tip of her elbow. It fell and another came.

I reached out and caught that one on my forefinger before it fell, and said, dreamily, "You've been nicked yourself, my girl."

"Horrors!" she breathed. Those dear eyes looking into mine grew misty and appealing. She

murmured: "Don't let me faint! Bobolink, you mustn't let me faint!"

She nearly did, though. I dragged myself a foot or two to that pool and came back with water in my hat and threw it in her face.

She opened those glorious eyes and smiled and said, "Isn't that the silly woman of it?"

Her strength came back with a rush as soon as I had tied a handkerchief around the place. She looked over her shoulder with a calculating glance at the Organ, and right away I felt her arm slide under mine with a strong lifting motion, and doggedly and miserably I tried to shake her off.

"Can't you see I'm crippled?" I asked.

"Do you realize," she said. "that it's going to rain, and rain hard? Try to stand."

"Water will be coursing down through here good in half an hour," I said, sternly. "You have got to make a run for it. You go on ahead, and let me crawl along as best I can."

May's face swam close to mine.

"Is that the way that partners talk, as you understand it?" she said.

She glistened, and, Gad! I was perfectly voiceless, hung there in a void—by my heels again!

As soon as I could get a grip on myself I groaned: "I'm not worth saving. My miserable carcass—let the dead leaf lie where it falls."

"You're dreaming," May said, "You mean you won't come! You won't even try!"

"Well, I do mean that," I said. "So now you know."

"You're dreaming," she said again, and she closed with me and grappled with me.

I never had anything come over me like that before—never. It was delicious, it was restful, and still I fought against it. I pretended to myself that I wanted her to drop her arms and run away because that was what I ought to wish for her. It was a far cry from her actual procedure. For a second or two I couldn't tell what was happening, and then I saw that she was actually binding my limp body to hers with the aid of the lariat she had dropped in the sand when she and Inky began exchanging lead. I felt the coils tighten, I felt my arms being drawn over her shoulders, and that pack hitch drew me closer to her than I had ever drawn before. She had seen to it that I couldn't draw back, couldn't hold off, couldn't do anything but the one thing I had yearned to do above all others—in other circumstances than these, of course—fall on May's neck, namely.

"Is that lariat across the wound?" she asked me.

I grunted out a negative. God bless her ambisextrous soul, I felt less like dying then than ever, and I submitted like a dummy while she drew my right arm tight over her shoulder and swayed forward. The strength in that pliant body was surprising, it certainly was, and it seemed to pass into my own shaking carcass like a contagion.

"This is not my phantom touch," I muttered.

She missed that, though. She was looking back there at the Organ, still visible over the angle of the canyon wall. Those great purple rounds hung there distant and ethereal as ever; but that massive

cloud which they had held in check had rolled out over them now, dashing out in mid-heaven there like a surf, in shreds and long white filaments; and that menacing suggestion of music was just reaching our ears, too, as if unseen fingers were wandering among the stops of the Organ.

I felt like some queer gink in the *Arabian Nights*. Sinbad in the valley of diamonds couldn't have had any more complex emotions than those that rolled round in Bobolink McCarty in the Canyon of the Fools, and the similarity in our cases chiefly lay in the fact that we couldn't get out.

The danger lay just here: Somewhere at the top of that mountain, you understand, was a natural reservoir, a lake in the clouds which was big enough to hold in a twinkling a whole cloudburst, and then pour it into the canyon's gullet for hours at a time. Incarnación was a delicate humorist, you have to grant that, and there was a kind of fitness in letting the canyon dispose of its own fools.

It was bent on just that, as far as I could see. I knew very well it was a mile or better to that place where the walls were broken down enough to let us up out of the bed, and I did desperately fear we wouldn't make it. I sagged back, wrestled with that slim form to which I was lashed, and pleaded with her like a madman.

"Go it alone, little partner," I said, hoarsely. "You've done your best. You can't make it this way. May, do you hear me? Beat it!"

"Save your breath for the climb," she said, tensely, slanting round at me. By George! there

was a strange lighting on that sweet face! I was moved to one more mad effort by it. I figured that by playing the iron and not forcing it, my old policy, I might yet regain lost ground. I swayed forward helplessly, step by step with May, and I dreamed that I had floated up into the empyrean in company with a shining goddess whose strength and steadfastness were assisting a guilty mortal to a seat beside her on Olympus. She did have some near kinship with the immortals, I'll swear to that. Invincible as she was beautiful, courage itself, and I had the absurd notion that nothing, not the play of the elements even, could pin those velvet shoulders to the mat.

Once she stalked bodily into a pool of cool water to revive me. We came out dripping, and I had the half-exasperated sense that she had nerve enough to make the grade, after all, if nerve alone would do it. Exasperated—can you merge with me? There were moments when I prayed for that water to fall on us and end her chances, and mine, too; pour down on us infinite green tons and grind the body of El Romantico beneath the sands of the canyon floor forever. And her unspoken answer was merely to readjust that lariat and wind me tight in that whole-hearted grip again. Wasn't that ironic? The lord protector, all the blood out of his body, white as plaster, no more use than a loose picket in a picket fence, drooping there on that shoulder, the incarnated, smooth, quite material shoulder of that love he had called out of the skies by waving some wand, by acquiring some road talisman, by picking up what some less gifted

individual had dropped on the very threshold of adventure. Such is the twisted skein of things, my friends.

I resigned myself just to feeling the pulse of that rapid breathing and the strength in those braced arms. There was truly a wonderful spring in that delicate and supple body. Already, it seemed, the desert had molded her and adapted her to its rugged haunts.

I caught sight of a sulphurous wreath drifting away from those rock faces, those swarthy faces frowning through delicate veils of cloud. The topmost cloud had puffed out and reared up into the blue, altering its shape weirdly. It looked like the flattened head of a king cobra rising out of its rocky nest there with fascinating stealth.

"Look here, May!" I breathed in the girl's ear. "This is hopeless madness. It's already raining on the mountain. Drop me while there's still time."

May followed my glance.

"You have got the darnedest jinx tacked on to you," she said, desperately. "The darndest jinx! Why couldn't that have held off half an hour? With any other mortal it would have."

It was almost a wail, and I thought she was weakening.

"That's what I've been telling you." I pressed it on her craftily. "That's what I'm saying now. The gods are all ag'in' me. Let me down."

I exerted all my strength against her, but the devil of it is I wanted her to exert more. How do you account for that? I wanted her to stick, and she did stick, in spite of the mulish streak in me.

Her eyes glittered on mine. She did have wonderful eyes—have I alluded to that?—full of blue fire, and with that deep-seated constancy in them that nothing can shake and only a fool would question. I've told you already Juan's pet name for her—*La Doncella de los Ojos Vivos* (The Damsel with the Living Eyes). Isn't that beautifully descriptive?—and not one hair overdrawn, either. It simply shows the resources of the Spanish language. A man can drop that out in Spanish and get away whole—it's part of the genius of that tongue—but I imagine it falls flat in English unless it happens to meet sympathetic ears.

"Are you going to quit?" May asked me, calmly.

She stung me to madness, but what would you? I couldn't get out of that straitjacket—providentially for me, I'll agree. I was bound up with her, meshed, as good as being taken pickaback by that resolute woman. I got braced on my two legs again instead of sagging a dead weight on her, and we forged ahead a step at a time. She meant to stand or fall with me, that was plain. We had got into a part of the canyon where the walls were scarcely twenty feet apart. I looked at them hazily as I went reeling along, planting my feet anywhere and everywhere, on May's ankles for choice, and I saw shapes in the stone, dire shapes, designs wrought by the blind touch of the elements in century-slow touches, full of the choice hesitations of art.

All very fine, but the sculptor had forgotten to

chisel steps there. Not a toehold anywhere, not a fingerhold, and the deluge coming nearer. It was growing dark there in that gallery of fearful shapes expanded to inhabit the monstrous spaces in which dreams run their course.

I fancied we were doomed to go on this way until those madmen scurrying from the mountain top flung the misty veil of death over us, and I was just far enough out of touch with realities to find something grateful and poetic in that notion. Every time I caught a glimpse of those glorious, those living eyes of that bewitching damsel putting every ounce of her strength into the business of prolonging my miserable existence I felt my heart revive, just as it had when I lay with my head in her lap there in the sunshine and peace of Madcap. I had a sense that that something yearning and maternal in her being was bigger, if anything, than my own destiny, big enough to alter it, big enough to overturn it and junk it; and I was weak enough to repress the healthy pride that normally attends on the heroic mood and feel grateful for the protection afforded me by a slip of a girl.

Gloom poured in there like a fluid. The giant rounds of the Organ's topmost pipes were all I could see now, and I had a suspicion that that hint of music we had been hearing for weeks, that wandering desert fugue, was going to give way to something more lively.

In these dry countries water is terrible; it's intractable and unreasonable. You've seen mean people, haven't you, who harbor grouches and let

small occasions pass, and then vent their spleen in one terrific instant which makes up for all those evil moments of restraint? That's the way it is with water in the desert. It's a sort of cloud ambush, a fluid winding sheet wrapping round the objects it destroys.

May knew as well as I did, of course, that delay meant death; but she was as cool as if she was back there in her tent embroidering. She just gave one short cry of satisfaction when her eye, wandering along that stone coping, picked out what she had been looking for—a stone projection thirty feet over our heads, a kind of warty finger poking out there, with a wide ledge behind it.

"We transfer here," May said, and she took that lariat adrift from my body. I fell to my knees. I had lost buckets of blood by that time, I suppose, and I could just whisper, "Can you make it?" when I saw her laying the loops of that rawhide together.

"I've got to."

Wasn't that charming in its directness? There were no two ways about it. She had got to!

"We'll have reason to be grateful for Harry Rolfe's teaching before we're through," she said, hastily, and set herself to throw that thing. You have to admit it was a bitter moment for a man, who had come out here on a heroic errand, to find his very life hanging on the accuracy of a girl's aim. They're not noted for throwing things, as a rule, I believe.

May was an exception. She had a boy's mania for shying stones at bottles and tin cans, and her

sense of direction was exquisite. When she missed that first shot she wasn't dismayed at all. I heard a remote sound, a kind of bubbling, bursting whisper, as if something profane had been muttered at the back of a villainous throat, and I knew by that that the water had already begun to pour out of that lake in the clouds. It was coming down to fill the canyon choking full—perhaps in the next second.

She made it with the third try, and cried out to me, "Let me see you climb," breathing fast. I felt the blood rouse in my veins and my battered body glowed in protest.

"Women and children first," I said, hoarsely, and May put both arms about me desperately, and cried out: "You wouldn't be such a fool! Bobolink, you're—coming, aren't you?"

She paid me the high compliment of fearing I might prefer to drown rather than owe my life to a woman.

"I have strength enough in my arms," I shouted, nonsensically. She wasn't questioning that strength.

Well, she might have known that as a brain athlete I was in the discard. I followed her, and I had no sooner dragged my spent body over that ledge than it began raining, and at the same time the water itself seemed to spring out of solid rock down there, at a blow, with a roar. It was like a white fang, like a livid tusk gleaming in that original blackness, goring the canyon bed, rooting under mighty stones and tossing them aside. Great, drenching plumes of spray sprang up and

hissed in our faces, and we stood there wearied out, staring, staring at that spot, lost in foam now, where we had stood and argued questions of precedence a minute before.

Those madmen had a thousand voices and a curse in every voice. Stroke on stroke of lightning split the canyon wide. It was like a dance of shining daggers. By Jupiter! it staggered us, it stunned us! I saw it nip those rock faces not a hundred yards from us. Ragged walls leaped up, enormous, glittering, torrential, crowned with fire, their ghastly gray surfaces shining wet—and vanished.

May clung to me; I held her close and I cried in her ear: "I'm yours now, body and soul—your dog—to all eternity. You've saved my life. Do you hear?"

"No, no, no!" she whipped back. "Oh, Bob, you'll hate me for this, and I can't help it," and she set her lips against mine—hard.

There wasn't any mistaking the massive quality of that kiss. It was like nothing that had gone before, and even in the years to come it wasn't likely to be duplicated. Joe Carney was right. The act is foolish, but the sensation is grand.

Then another flash of lightning, and I caught an absurd glimpse of Maricopa in the flesh, draggled mush and all, glaring down at us, with a grass rope in his hands.

CHAPTER XX

I CAN'T give you that second rescue in much detail. I know we were drawn up, one after the other, into the midst of that sheriff's posse. I seem to remember the face of General Terrazas floating there, and the ghostly wreck that was Faggard; but by that time I had lost much blood, and my memories of that night are the distortions of fever. I met May in most unlikely places. We whirled together on train tops, lashed to steam pipes that roasted us alive. We conferred secretly there in the decorum of the Gowdy parlor, sitting together on the wabbly brown-plush organ stool. Then, lashed to her back, I quaked in the shadow of black escarpments while she bore me over hot plains ropy with lava in glowing twists, like slag from blast furnaces. I cried out in torment, thinking one came to pitch me into hell's fires, and in answer to the prayer of my nerves a mountain, plucked up by its ragged roots like a monstrous molar, was planted on us and we pursued our way through tons of rock.

We fled on tiptoe down thousands of wooden stairs furred with the scrape of lumpish feet. The rock arching over us showed the prying finger of successive blasts of dynamite in beautiful powdery blue-gray crystals. I heard the clink of drills, the

hiss of fuses, a rush and scurry of invisible feet. We were whirled through the blackness of working stopes to the tune of remote explosions, and leaned against pillars of fat Oregon pine, sheathed in the blue glitter of copper sulphates, their bases charred by contact with hot stones.

A blue ray from May's eye must have dissolved all that. I woke up, and it was morning, yellow morning, the tent flap thrown open and May kneeling by my cot with a bowl of broth in her hands and the same old mischief in her eye.

"My Damsel with the Living Eyes," I murmured.

I shut my own bashfully. I remembered that I was hers, hers eternally. I wanted to pick up the thread where we had dropped it, boom in on that note of high and strong passion, if you choose, and I couldn't do it. Some congealing humor intervened. She had kissed me, there wasn't any controverting that; but I wondered timorously whether she had known what she was about. Obviously not, because she didn't once allude to the circumstance, didn't seem to admit it to that inmost citadel. Perish the thought! She was all sisterly affection again when she put that spoon to my mouth, after first tasting it for temperature, and I simply did what she commanded—swallowed—hard. Such was my mood, too. I was in danger of coming unglued, as always when I found myself under that girl's ministrations.

"I suppose you know," May said, "that you're in danger of being a rich man, after all. They've rescued Mr. Polhill, following your instructions,

and the poor man insists that you are to have a quarter of the gold."

"A quarter!" I breathed.

My eye coasted about the appointments of that tent in a daze. It was like good news whispered in a refulgent dream, and I didn't mean to lean on it all in one rush. I was attracted suddenly by a gory object hung over a soap box at the foot of my cot—my red shirt, if you please, hung there in full view, like a diploma issued to me by the hard school of experience.

"She actually shot me, then!" I faltered. "I didn't dream that!"

"You poor boy!" May whispered. "How awfully little you know of women's impulses! You will play with fire, won't you?"

"You don't know, then?" I gasped. "You haven't been told?"

"I don't need to be told," May countered with one of her brilliant smiles. "I know already. Oh, Bobolink, you need a guardian!"

I wanted to shout out, "I appoint you guardian," but I was mute as ever. I had just the touch of May's withdrawing finger tips and she was gone.

My next meal Clint brought me. I asked after May, and he said that she was indisposed, but only slightly. Confirmation of Polhill's award to me came in next day. The amount was in the neighborhood of forty thousand dollars. May was still indisposed. I knew the trouble. She had repented of that kiss; she feared its implications; she thought that I might want to resume in the grand style, and she wasn't willing. It looked like formal

times, right; the more so when news trickled into camp that Jim Harper hadn't got away at all, but was lying now in the jail at Madcap, where the dutiful Australian had taken him the instant May had delivered him into that long puncher's care. I knew about that from May's own lips as soon as I was able to waver forth from my tent.

"What must he think?" she whispered, with eyes as big as saucers. "What must poor Jim think? I haven't slept a wink. There's only one interpretation from his viewpoint and that is that I double-crossed him. Isn't it awful? Oh, Bob, you were right, dead right!" she wailed. "You looked farther than I did, as always. I'm so bitterly ashamed. Harry Rolfe was just one of Maricopa's men. I trusted him and he played a part with me—he played a part."

"What I should call a leading role," I said, grimly, and May hadn't heart to fire up. "Well, you can't help all that," I went on, roughly. "No use crying over spilled milk, is there?"

I got a special satisfaction in pronouncing those words.

"Spilled milk?" she faltered. "I don't see what that has to do with it. My duty is to stick by Jim now. If he'd got clear away that would have been another story—I did reserve some rights—but as it is, I can't—oh, I can't ever just go away and let him rot in jail!"

"You're going to—stick by him—to the finish?"

"I must, if I have to set up a shop across the road from the jail to do it. Man, the agonies I've endured since knowing—knowing Jim's predica-

ment and all. There aren't words—there aren't words. We little know, don't we? Why couldn't he have been more candid with me? But, no, he couldn't bear for me to know that he was all but down and out, don't you see? And when he got my wire he was just struggling with conscience, and that decided him to close with Swasey's offer and take the job sampling at the Black Prince. Don't you see I was at the back of it all? Can't you come out of your shell enough to agree with me in that at least?"

"No, I can't," I said.

She dropped that line for the time being. I sauntered off across the flat, waggle-kneed. The same old scenery, the same frowzy cottonwoods, the same tumbled foothills, the same reach of desert with colors swimming on it like colors on a painter's palette, but the implications were different—fatal, somehow. What was I to do now? It looked like the old case of Othello and his occupation, when by chance I saw that family group sitting outdoors round a deal table with the eternal blue prints laid out and Clint's cleavers bearing them down. He and old Dan were figuring in new possibilities. Azalea's chin was over Dan's shoulder and Aury was standing sorrowfully a few feet away, looking through the mountain.

"We're sure of it now, old man," Clint said. He jumped up and grabbed me by the shoulders. "We've figured in everything—dynamite, food, the dip, and the strike—and the dirt's there. It's there, and the man that denies it is a fool. This property, rightly worked, will make Cripple Creek

look like a worked-out claim. The stuff is here in buckets."

"All is," said old Dan, "a little capital is needed. Swasey is dead, you know. We can't look to him."

The fact is, they looked to me—and I agreed. What else was there for me to do? Clint tore through space, seized my hand, and told me candidly that I had laid the foundation for big works with those few words.

"I knew when I first saw you," he shrieked, "that you were one man in a million. I felt it in my supreme being. And you won't regret it. The stuff is here, the way I said that first day, and I've never ceased to say it, have I? A fissure vein, as God lives, Bob! I'm not sure another stick of dynamite won't fetch us into ore, and in that case we won't need your money. All we want is the assurance that if we do need capital we know where to lay our hands on it."

"I'll put in half this stake, whatever it comes to," I said, recklessly.

Clint glowed like a furnace.

"That's what I like to hear! My courage was never better. As old Dan here says the stuff is here—under our feet, and the minute I get to eating meat three times a day again I will get my gall back, I promise you. Why, if I had twenty thou myself that wasn't working I wouldn't be afraid to plank every last cent of it into these diggings, and I would sleep that night like a child, too!"

It wasn't till that second that I saw Aury's face,

full of tragic weariness, turned on old Dan's glorified face. She wanted to speak, but she couldn't bring herself to throw cold water on that dream of the old adventurer even now. But she did give me a qualm, I'm free to say.

The next day Maricopa turned up. We met in the shadow of the dynamite house, and the wonderful old fox actually grinned at me. A strange glow passed through me. I seemed to see something companionable, after all, in that remorseless man, although I quaked involuntarily at his touch, at his Machiavellian smile under that tawny mustache whose individual hairs seemed sentient, like tentacles thrown out to see what was in the wind, and he did know what was in the wind. He knew well enough what was in the wind between May and me.

I said, "I understood you had been ironed out."

He said, pleasantly, "I heard that rumor, too," and without saying any more on that head he inquired slyly how my old love, the dark rebel, was coming on. Had I given her a thought of late?

"You're in a position to give her more encouragement now," he said. "I understand a check has been deposited to your account."

"Encouragement is the last thing that woman needs," I said, hoarsely.

"You don't deny giving it to her, I suppose."

"What alternative did you leave me?" I said, sulkily. "Didn't I agree? It was that or prison bars, and I chose that."

"You lived up to your contract, too—didn't leave one loose end, I must say."

"Well, perhaps not."

He bit the end off a poison-green cigar and said, mildly, "There is one little thing that you could do for me if you felt so inclined."

"Don't think I am going to get down on my knees to you," I sneered. "I've come into money through this business, but it was a bad day for me when I saw you, just the same—a bad day, mister. It lost me the respect of the only woman in the world I care anything about. I suppose you know that by now. Yes, lost to me for all time. You know what she thinks? She thinks I used her as bait to lure that poor devil Harper from his lair."

"You certainly succeeded," he chuckled. "I won't say that thought wasn't in the back of my head, too. But wait! Remember what I told you about that dog-gone old gray mule? We don't need this Harper very bad. As a matter of fact, we've got a deathbed confession from Swasey, and we have the general cold now on a charge of looting the Black Prince. Faggard was an old plant of Swasey's. He and Swasey were both members of a cute little society for auriferous research. Get the plot? Faggard came into town, wormed his way into Polhill's good graces, and waited for the cards to fall. He took orders from Swasey from the first day. They got Harper into the deal, and between them they thought of that nice dodge to do away with Polhill and put Jim into his clothes. They had everything but courage, and the best they could do with old Sebastian was shove him down into the Pandora and start that story about

the keeper of the mine. It would have worked with anyone but a bearcat like yourself."

"Don't feed me on that stuff," I said, grumpily. "I know where I fall short better than you do. Tell me that Jim Harper is lying somewhere toes up and you may interest me."

"I will interest you yet. Well, here, I don't mind telling you I have come out here partly in behalf of Incarnación Terrazas. She's still in hiding, understand. A good girl, if she did go wrong on impulse. I suppose you know by this time, my boy, that that was a self-locking combination—you and Inky."

"A self-locking combination," I gasped. "You'll have to expound that further."

"Here's the nubbin of it: To keep my hooks on Mr. Terrazas I needed the assistance of Mrs. Terrazas. I promised her freedom from that brute, and freedom wasn't enough. She wanted slavery again. She wanted you handed to her on a platter—I might say she had already had a glimpse or two of your handsome face drifting about town; everybody had, for that matter—and she left me to do the carving. You don't mind my being perfectly straightforward with you, I hope. She agreed to help me, and I agreed to put you in her way."

"You didn't figure my help anything then?" I whispered, tensely.

"Not at that time, my boy. We didn't know what genius there was in you for follow-up. We did know—at least I did—that you hadn't anything to fear from Terrazas. Personally, he's the

biggest coward in the Western Hemisphere. That little story was calculated to draw you down into the canyon, and I reckoned Inky could weave her spell without assistance."

"So, then, I've been a cat's-paw!" I hissed.

There was more in that vein, and Maricopa told me I was more precious than rubies to the women, a thing that I could well believe. He led me on to see what a struggle had gone on in Inky's breast, and how my red shirt was the product of another woman, really—an insane transient, so to speak, in that soft bosom. He walked away a pace or two, and came back and put his hand on my shoulder with that old fatherly light in his turquoise eyes.

"You see what I mean? She didn't mean half the lead she poured at you. Take time and think this over. Here you are, well fixed—this check is for a lot of money—nothing is lacking to you but the one essential, and do you mean to tell me you won't try for that? Suppose you could go to May and say: 'Jim is gone. Jim has slipped over the border while the guard was sleeping. He's gone out of your life, and in place of him here's Bob McCarty, rich and single—rich and single, boy.' Isn't there the possibility, isn't there a strong possibility even that she—"

"Jim?" I gasped. "Don't tell me that he—"

"You and Inky have done me a big turn between you," Maricopa said. "But as things lie now you have something like a charge against that impulsive woman."

"Nothing but a paltry attempt at assassination," I threw in.

"Exactly! I'm glad to see you call things by their right name. Paltry—a paltry bit of lead."

"What's your proposition?" I found breath enough to inquire.

He arched his brows and slipped a cigar between my teeth just as at that first conference.

"You to let Incarnación off—it's a first offense—and me to see to it that Jim Harper is slipped over the border by accident."

I had sunk my teeth into that cigar until they met, and now I gulped and got hold of his hand and shook it hard.

"Inky!" I said. "Why, man alive, I never—you don't think I lay it up against that poor girl! She only did what she thought was right in polishing me off, and at that time I was in a frame of mind to agree with her. Tell her I'm only sorry we don't live in Turkey."

So the gods laughed to see that, whereas I had set out with such high hopes of spinning the world the other way round in May's behalf, actually the only way I could help her was to refuse to prosecute another woman who had shot me down for love of me. My red shirt had put into my hands a sordid bargaining power by the use of which I brought it about that I never did see Jim Harper in this life, and now am little likely to. I had freed him. That was proof enough to May, or should be, that I hadn't meant to smoke him out and disgrace him in her eyes, as she must have more than half suspected.

Yes, I swallowed my red shirt whole, and within twenty-four hours a secret messenger came to

tell me that Jim Harper had made good his escape.

The way was never plainer, and I had never balked at it so mulishly as when it lay straight before me. I saw May alone, and I saw how foolish had been all my aspirations. She was right. I was nothing but a boy, a callow fool; and May, my dear sophisticated May, had need of some more dashing partner.

She must be told, of course, of Harper's flight. I drifted across the flat with my head hung low. It was going to be my last visit to that tormenting creature. The sun was sinking, its last shafts splintering on the mountain top and glowing there in those cottonwoods and striking fire from the nickel parts of poor old Dan's flute, which he was tuning up there pathetically, sitting under his dead fig tree. He was going to woo the gold out of the rock with music, and a little way off sat melancholy Sydney with his head in his hands.

I knocked on May's tent pole and she said, "Come in."

I could see—or I fancied in that half light I could see—traces of tears. Her cheeks were flaming.

"Bob!" she cried, and I felt the same thick secrecy in my throat, in my ears, in the very air that fanned me, that I had felt so many times in passages with May. Her superior generalship, I suppose, or my bashful consciousness of her intellectual gifts. Still, I couldn't help remembering how close I had held her just that once without music. I opened my mouth to say something in the

grand style—just a word or two whose sad romanticism would turn her heart inside out, beat her to her knees, melt her, tear her, not to say demolish—and do you know what I said?

"Look here," I suddenly burst out, "you're going away, and I'm staying to locate this ore. We may not meet again, and I want you to know that I appreciate what you have done for me. You saved my life!"

"Don't, don't, don't!" May cried, and she actually put her fingers on my lips. "Don't tell me that! Wasn't I saving my own at the same time?"

"Saving your own?" I repeated. "Yes, you would have to, associated with an ineffectual fool like myself."

May spun round and said, half angrily: "You ought not to be allowed to say such things about yourself. You sha'n't be! Oh, your role has been so much more glorious than mine! Poor, wretched Jim! Why didn't I tell you about him sooner? I knew from the first. I met him again and again, and he told me what a predicament he was in. And then—I couldn't bear for you to know Jim's true character. I had known, of course, from the instant I accepted him, practically, that he wasn't the man of men and never could be all in all to me. But I was bound to go through with it. It went on from bad to worse. He as good as accused me of having got him into this by coming out here when things were at low ebb with him, and what was left for me after that but to attempt rescue?

"Oh, so that was where Rolfe came in!" I uttered, softly.

"That was where," May rejoined, in a chastened little voice. "I led him on. I did everything short of intriguing with him, Bob, and I played right into his hands. I was working for just my private ends, and you—you—your role was so much more glorious."

"Soft pedal on that!" I cried, hoarsely.

"Everybody says there isn't any man but you west of the Mississippi that would have done it. It's easy enough to be brave to the sound of drums and with everybody round you. But you—a man said to me, 'You little know,' he said—'you little know the service that young man has rendered his country.'"

I was in a cold sweat. I merely groaned, "It was nothing—nothing at all!"

"Let you tell it!" May said.

"I'll tell you just one thing," I said, "and that's the thing I came here to say. I fixed it for Jim to escape. He's gone. He'll not trouble you any more, May. He's gone out of your life for good and all, and he's in as good shape as he was in when you first took him up, and I guess that's all a man of his stamp can ask. You're free."

"Gone?" May whispered. "Free? You freed him? You've used your influence?"

With a sickly smile I answered, "Such as it was," and I didn't say precisely what was.

May's eyes were shining like blue stars again, and still we were nonplused and fussed for something good to say. She murmured, "I might have known that I could count on you," and our eyes wandered.

I don't know that the spell would have been broken to this day if my eye hadn't wandered to the back of the tent and fastened on that package I had seen her fumbling with. I saw its contents now; nothing less than a circular cake with a hole in the center of it, a cake beautifully frosted and decorated with little colored nodules.

"Something from home?" I asked, foolishly.

"Mother sent it. I'd forgotten to tell you. It's my birthday."

"Your birthday?"

"Certain sure! Count 'em," May said, mischievously, and she began planting little red candles in that cake one by one.

I followed the motion of those taper fingers in short flashes, and counted—counted in a daze, in a dream, and my heart beat high. She stopped at twenty-one. Twenty-one! Twenty-one!

"You're—you're only just a citizen!" I gasped. "But look here, what day of the month is it, please?"

"The twenty-second."

"The twenty-second? Then look here, May! We were—we were born the same day!"

Can you imagine it? Born the same day! Think of the different roads we had traveled to reach the same end. The same day! I never could get over that. And May dropped her hands at her sides, stared, sparkled, flamed, came one step toward me, and whispered, "Let's die together."

And by George! for the first time in all that weary while I thought I saw a chance for me! What if I took her in my arms, swept her off her

feet, held her close, brooked no denying, wasn't it plausible to suppose that I might crush out all opposition there? Plausible, and more than that. Nothing did hold me back, it's true; but nothing could have, I verily believe. I saw the Canyon of the Fools going down in chaos; I saw Clint's plans and mine for dropping down on that body of ore evaporate like morning mist over the red buttes; I saw Clint, in one swift vision, married to a portionless Aurelia, and actually providing for her by the toil of his hands—that did take place in due course, too—and even so I went after my objective without once wavering. My arms went out, they went round her in one huge hungry circle, encompassed her, unabashed, undeterred, too, drew her close, just as I had prefigured it so many times, and she admitted me to that circle.

I don't know how it was done to this day; in a rush, most likely, a dizzy man's plunge into the infinite. I didn't find any words at all for something like a thousand years spent looking into those dear eyes and seeing how they treasured me, and when I did stir myself I merely said, "Pretty keen, eh?" if I remember rightly—banal as the deuce, and I couldn't help it. and May sighed back: "Luscious! Just as I've imagined it!"

"Imagined it? You have imagined it?"

"Oh, my guilty conscience, yes! What girls wouldn't have, with a man like you in the offing."

Is there anything half so conventional, so arbitrary, as the spoken word? And yet it does convey intelligence on occasion. She told me then with unblushing intensity that she had loved me,

worlds without end, from the first, and with increasing intensity, and even vehemence, from the instant of my walking through that little gate that bent both ways. Voicelessly, of course, and yet she had implicit faith that those who sorted destinies would admit the imperious necessity of her heart's desire.

Her head sank against me. I thought of a few good leads, rejected them all, rejected everything but the mere melting fact of that divine receptivity of her.

"It doesn't somehow stand to reason," I remember saying, and May whispered:

"Aren't you willing to lose your reason if you get me in exchange? Be careful with your answer."

I was careful, and quick, too. There wasn't any choice of answer. You couldn't have driven an outside idea into my head with a top maul, I venture to assert. I asked her silly questions in my turn, I don't deny that. I even probed her gently on the subject of that unlovely disease, jealousy. Had she been jealous? Was that the key, possibly, to some of her actions?

She nodded and murmured, "It certainly gets you where you live, doesn't it?"

I told her that it did, and I cried, joyfully: "You don't seem to have a shred of your ambisextrous nature left. Do you know that? You're all woman now, it seems to me. Maybe now you'll be satisfied to go round and lock the doors and windows when the clock strikes nine."

May said that nothing in this world was more certain.

"I'm safe now," she whispered. "You've always wanted to save me, you romantic darling, and now you have saved me from my own worst enemy—myself."

I didn't stop to put a fool's interpretation on that utterance. A bright moon was rising over the world, over the Canyon of the Fools, too, silvering the tent pole. I gathered May close, held her high, and breathed with difficulty. I muttered, "Kiss me, kiss me, kiss me, love me, kiss me!" for want of better words. She did, too, straightway. It was the old story of the uninstructed wild bee and the random honeysuckle. For long and long. When at last our lips were free for speech May's adoring eyes met mine full.

She whispered, "Shall I tell you a secret?"

"Don't keep any from me."

"No, but seriously, shall I?"

"Seriously, yes."

"I think you ought to know. You are the only man but one outside of Jim that I have ever kissed in my whole life—deliberately."

And I believed her.

THE END

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